

# SPACENARO HO!

The  
Further Adventures of  
**LON WYNTER**  
by  
**VOL MOLESWORTH**



6<sup>d</sup>



RADIO RECORD

VOL. 6 .... N° 18



# “SPACEWARD, HO!”

Sequel to

“THE STRATOSPHERE PATROL”

being the further adventures of

LON WYNTER

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By VOL MOLESWORTH.

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## CHAPTER I.

“Listen, Carl, you simply must tell me. This will be the biggest newspaper story of the year. Why, it’s a sensation; I’ll scoop every other paper in Australia and maybe even put the big television stations to shame.”

The pretty, auburn-haired girl leaned forward eagerly as she spoke, unaware that other people in the little wine bar were watching her curiously. Captain Carl Svengali, of the Gray Legion, merely grinned and shook his head.

“Sorry, Zelie,” he said.

“But Carl,” the girl insisted, “you’ve got to give me the information I want.”

Carl put a cigarette between his lips and struck a match. Being tall, with dark Italian features, jet black hair and a thin moustache, he cut quite a striking figure in his neat gray uniform, with the gold Captain’s bars gleaming on the shoulder straps. He looked at the girl sitting opposite him through a drifting haze of cigarette smoke.

“My dear Zelie,” he said steadily. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to help you get a scoop for your newspaper, but an official ‘hush-hush’ has been imposed on this particular matter, and I’d be court-martialed if I told you a single word.”

“But damn it, Carl—the public already has a vague idea what’s about to happen. Rumours are going round—”

“So long as they remain just rumours and don’t become hard facts, it doesn’t matter. Good Lord, Zelie, there’d be hell to pay if your paper printed this story. Heaven knows what international trouble might start!”

“All right, Carl.” The girl relaxed, giving a little shrug of dis-

appointment. "I won't worry you about it any more." She picked up her glass and sipped the ruby-coloured wine it held. "But I do know this much. Seven months ago a squadron of unidentified bombing planes made a 'Pearl Harbour' attack on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Later, they raided towns in Honduras, New Guinea, Poland, and elsewhere. You were one of the Gray Legion pilots who flew after those black bombers; you were decorated and promoted to the rank of Captain for the part you played in capturing their mothercraft, hovering up in the stratosphere——"

Carl blew a smoke-ring.

"That's old stuff, Zelie. The censors released the story straight away; it was too hot to hush up. Why, until we captured their damned aircraft-carrier-of-the-skies, people were actually thinking that Great Britain had declared war on America! The public had to be told the truth—the incredible truth."

"Yes," Zelie agreed, "it was incredible. The crew of the black carrier turned out to be queer-looking dwarfs, belonging to no race known on Earth. The leader of the dwarfs, a fellow named Alpha, admitted that he and his ship had flown to the Earth from the planet Venus. They had been visiting earth secretly for years, landing in the water and mining the beds of our oceans. When the four big nations on Earth set up the Allied Stratosphere Patrol, the secrecy of the dwarfs' deep-sea plundering was endangered; for that reason they bombed our cities, delivering an ultimatum that the Patrol be disbanded.\*"

\* See "THE STRATOSPHERE PATROL," by Vol Molesworth.

Zelie had here summarised an event that would go down in the pages of history. After the second world war, the four triumphant nations (Britain, U.S.A., Russia and China) had set up the Allied Stratosphere Patrol, an international body of gallant airmen, pledged to keep bombers from the skies and thereby prevent another war. The Patrol, answerable to none except the new League of Nations, was absolutely impartial to politics and "isms"; its sole purpose was the everlasting preservation of peace. Formed on the old Roman military order, the Patrol was divided into two legions, each three thousand men strong. The legions were again split up into cohorts (300 men) and centuries (100 men), the latter commanded by officers known as Centurions.

The First Legion contained the ground staff; the men directing operations, the scientists, technicians, mechanics, the headquarters and intelligence departments; the Second Legion was made up of the pilots themselves—the bombing boys, the fighter-pilots, the reconnaissance experts, the hedge-hoppers—whose trim gray uniforms had earned for the Second Legion its nickname of the "Gray Legion."

Several times, with its speedy streamlined planes (equipped with rocket-jets which enabled them to climb to great heights, and the very latest armament), the Gray Legion had proven its worth. Once war had broken out in South America—border disputes—but the Gray Legionaires had attacked **both** sides so vigorously that the two belligerent countries had quickly signed an armistice. Again, when a band of high-flying pirates had begun raiding shipping lines, the Legionaires had shot the modern buccaneers out of the sky and bombed their island base to smithereens.

As Zelie had said, the Gray Legion had effectively intervened when a squadron of black bombers had begun indiscriminately to raid cities all over the world. One young centurion, Lon Wynter by name, had formulated a theory that the black raiders were not based on Earth at all, but came from another planet. This was proven to be correct when one of the black bombers was forced down in the Gulf of Mexico, and its crew of queer dwarfs taken prisoner. As a result of the major role he had played in the unmasking of the invaders, Wynter had been given

the highest decoration for valour, the Victoria Cross, and promoted to the rank of Major. He was now officially termed **primus pilus**, the senior centurion of the Gray Legion, the previous Major having been retired to the position of **praefectus castrorum** (camp adjutant).

"After the defeat of the dwarfs," Zelie went on, "one of their rocket-ships was brought here to Canberra Drome, where Legion scientists and engineers went over it with a fine tooth comb to find out exactly what made it tick. No, don't deny it, Carl—" she said, as the Italian started to object, "I learnt that much from a young technician at the drome, who became rather drunk at a party several months ago."

"Indeed," said Carl, rather grimly. "The young fool ought to be shot; and you, my dear, should be imprisoned for extracting secret information."

Zelie smiled as she took a cigarette from Carl's platinum case, which lay open on the table.

"I didn't extract it, Carl—he volunteered it." She dipped her cigarette into the flame of the match the Italian held out to her. "And I've found out other details, too. I happen to know that from the dope your scientists gathered when they examined the dwarfs' craft, they drew up certain blueprints, from which your technicians over at Canberra have built a special rocket-ship capable of leaving Earth's atmosphere, and I know that you, Carl, with several others, are going to fly that spaceship across the void to the Moon, or somewhere."

"Am I?" asked Carl, in mild surprise.

"Oh, Carl, don't act! I know you are—I won't give you the source of my information, or you'd have the poor boy arrested." She leaned forward again. "But don't you see, Carl? This will be the greatest newspaper sensation of the year; and if you'll give me the dope I want, I'll scoop Australia! Hell, Cap'n. 'Gray Legionaires Fly to the Moon.' Can't you just picture the headlines?"

"Yes, I can," said Carl blandly. "And I can also see myself answering charges of disclosing information contrary to the Official Secrets Act, and being sentenced by court-martial to six years' gaol with hard labour. In addition to which, you newshound, I can quite vividly picture you out of a job, blacklisted by every paper in the world."

"Damn you," Zelie exclaimed. "A fat lot of help you are." She eyed him thoughtfully. "What would you say, Carl, if I said I already knew that you were taking off in that special rocketship at daybreak to-morrow, and that your destination is not the Moon, but the world of Venus, 26 million miles away?"

"What!" Carl sat up with a jerk, spilling his wine. "How in the nine hells of Ethiopia did you find that out?"

"And," Zelie went on mockingly, "what would you do, Cap'n, if I told you that my story was in the composing room, ready to go to press as soon as I ring through and confirm the details?"

Carl ground out his cigarette, his jaw hardening. "Listen, you little fool," he snapped, "you're playing with fire, don't you realise that? My God, you'll not only land yourself in trouble, but others as well." He paused. "I've got to admit your information is correct; we are leaving at dawn to-morrow for Venus—but it's supposed to be a secret. This is a purely military project—the politicians and scientists would go screaming mad if they knew a rocket was leaving on an interplanetary voyage without them being represented. We want to find out first if it's safe to take a full expedition there. If we get back okay, then they'll build a bigger rocket and take ambassadors, diplomats, scientists and whatnots to exchange red tape and cancer cures with the dwarfs—if they turn out to be friendly—and maybe start interplanetary trade." Again he paused, deliberately. Then: "Zelie, you mustn't run that story now. I promise

you an exclusive interview when we return. But not a word now—understand?"

There was a short silence. The girl drained her glass and put it down on the table. Carl lit another cigarette and watched her, waiting. Finally:

"All right, Carl," she sighed. "But," she added, wistfully, "it would have been a hell of a good scoop for my paper!"

Shortly after this, Carl and Zelie left the wine bar and took the lift to the roof, where Carl's jet-plane was parked. It was the year 1956; except for very short trips, all travel was made by air. Carl took off with his rocket motors accelerating rapidly to thousands of revolutions per second, rose to three thousand feet, then gunned the plane down the coast towards Nowra, where Zelie lived. Dropping her there, after a final warning not to print the news of the forthcoming flight, the Italian sped south-west to Canberra, where one of the main dromes of the Gray Legion was situated.

Carl made a perfect landing on the concrete field, jumped down from the cabin, and surrendered the plane to a couple of grease-monkeys, who taxied it on into the hangars. Then he hurried across the landing ground to the tall, ultramodern buildings set aside as a barracks for the Legionaires.

By a queer stroke of chance, Major Lon Wynter, V.C., who was to command the Venus voyage, and a South American centurion named Tony Lopez, were leaving the barracks as Carl neared the entrance. Salutes were formally exchanged, then the three men relaxed.

Young Major Wynter was a tall, lanky man with curly hair, deeply tanned features, and a perpetual grin. The red ribbon of his V.C. burned on the gray cloth of his uniform; little lines of worry crinkled at the corners of his wide-set grey eyes. Lopez, on the other hand, was short and thickset, with olive-tinted skin and white teeth. The Spaniard had a curving white scar down one side of his face, memento of a wound received during the short-lived "war" with the black raiders.

The Major spoke.

"This is a coincidence, Carl." He knew Svengali well; the two had fought side-by-side when Gray Legionaires boarded the dwarfs' aircraft-carrier. "We were just going to look for you. We've all been summoned to the Colonel's office for a last-minute talk on to-morrow morning's blessed event. Tony here—" indicating the Spanish centurion, "has been sweating all day with a slide rule and a sheaf of star maps, figuring trajectories, orbital velocities, tangents, and everything else in the realm of involved mechanics and three-dimensional trigonometry. In other words, he has plotted a course for our little fit to Venus." Here Lon paused and looked curiously at Svengali. "What's the matter, Carl —worried about something?"

The Italian started: was the anxiety caused by his talk with Zelie showing on his face? Would it be wise to confide in his two friends what had been said at the wine bar? He considered the idea for a moment, then discarded it. Summoning a grin, he said: "No, Major, nothing's troubling me; I'm feeling a wee bit scared about the take-off to-morrow, that's all."

"Oh, yeah?" slanged Lopez. "Captain Carl Svengali, D.F.M. winner, gets cold feet! You can tell that to the Marines. He's probably been jilted by a chorus girl, Major!"

Carl was only too happy to laugh the matter off that way. Together, the trio proceeded to the administration building, where Colonel Grant, Tribune in command of Canberra Drome, was waiting in his office to see the crew of the Venus rocket. The others picked for the trip were

already there—all three of them, for the crew had been kept to a maximum of six. Standing at ease at one side of the room was a robust, fair-haired Patrolman in his early twenties, who had deep blue eyes and strong Nerdie features. This was Oleg Gottfrieg, a Legionnaire of Norwegian extraction. Sitting at the opposite side of the office were two men clad in khaki uniforms, members of the First Legion. One—a thin, pale-faced fellow with sleek brown hair brushed well back, a high forehead, and keen eyes—wore the pips of a Lieutenant on his shoulder-straps; this was Wallace Kew, a military doctor, and also something of a scientist on the side. Next to the doctor sat a bigger, older man with two inverted stripes on his sleeve. He was Corporal Angus McAdam, red of hair and of Scottish complexion, who was to go along as the ship's engineer. It was said of McAdam that he knew more about the inside of engines than the outside of women, which was no mean compliment in its way.

Colonel Grant, gray-haired veteran of World War II., looked up from his desk and returned the salutes of the three newcomers.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "now you're all here, we may as well get right down to business. We have received information that outside persons are aware of the time set for the take-up. Therefore, the plans have been altered. Instead of taking off at daybreak to-morrow, you are to leave at midnight to-night. There has been a leakage of facts somewhere; Intelligence Officers are investigating that angle."

The six members of the rocket's crew showed interest; Captain Carl Svengali raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. After a slight pause, the Colonel went on, "I have some last-minute instructions to issue, and if you have any questions about any phase of your forthcoming flight, you are at liberty to ask them now. But first of all, the official posting of the crew."

The Colonel handed round a typewritten notice, signed by the **Legatus Legionis**, the highest-ranking officer of the Gray Legion.

It read:

Major Wynter, V.C.—Commanding Officer and Chief Pilot.

Captain Svengali, D.F.M.—Wireless Operator and Air Gunner.

Centurion Lopez.—Navigator and Co-Pilot.

Lieutenant Kew.—Medical Officer and Scientific Observer.

Corporal McAdam.—Engineer.

Patrolman Gottfrieg.—General Duties.

"I know what that means," said the last-named member of the crew. "I'm to act as chief cook and bottle-washer, deckhand, assistant engineer, general relief, ammunition carrier, doctor's assistant, bed-maker, and the man who comes around."

Lon smiled.

"You'll find you won't 'get around much any more' on board the 'Voyager,' Oleg," he remarked. "It's been built with a minimum of interior comfort and a maximum of exterior reinforcement against the rigors of travelling through the near-vacuum of space."

The Patrolman laughed.

"I was only joking, Major," he said.

## CHAPTER II.

Colonel Jackson coughed. "Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked mildly. When the six men had perused the notice and settled down again, he went on, "And now for a few routine questions." He glanced at Lon. "Major Wynter!"

Sir?"

"You've checked your controls and instruments?"

"Yes, sir. Co-ordination between the controls and the motors is

perfect. The instruments are in excellent working order, and, unless the shock of the take-off upset their rather delicate mechanism, they should be all right during the flight."

"I see." The Colonel made a note on his pad, then turned to Carl. "Have you checked your radio and television equipment, Captain Svengali?"

"I have, sir, and also the guns."

"Good." The Colonel turned to Tony. "You're the navigator, Centurion Lopez. Have you got your take-off trajectory and initial acceleration worked out?"

"Figures re-checked and handed to the pilot, sir. I've also plotted a rough course."

And so it went on, the Colonel asking each one in turn if he had seen to his particular equipment on the ship. He was questioning Gottfrieg about stores of concentrated food and dehydrated milk when a hurried knock came at the door. The Colonel uttered a curt invitation to enter; and, a moment later, an excited First Legionnaire burst into the office. After a quick salute, the khaki-clad man said, "It's the special rocket, Colonel. The sentry was knocked cold—someone's broken into the hangar—I've sounded the alarm——"

"What's that!" The Colonel jumped to his feet, then took a blue-steel Service revolver from the top drawer of his desk. "Come on, men, let's see if they've caught anyone!"

There was a general rush from the Colonel's office. Carl took the lead, his long legs proving their worth, with Lon close behind him and Oleg Gottfrieg a good third. The Italian was first out of the administration building and he crossed the landing field in record time. As he ran he fumbled with the button of his holster, got it undone, and whipped out his revolver. There was trouble in store for the intruder!

The searchlight at the Drome gates had been swung round and now the front of the special hangar was splashed with brilliant white light. A cordon of khaki-clad guards had been thrown round the hangar, their tommyguns ready to spit death at anyone coming through its open doorway. Colonel Grant came panting up, joined Lon and Carl, who were talking with an officer of the First Legion.

"What happened?" asked the Colonel, abruptly.

The officer explained. "There were two sentries on duty outside the hangar doors, Colonel. One of them was knocked cold, but the other broke free from his attackers and raised the alarm. We haven't attempted to go in after them yet; we threw a cordon around the hangar, played the searchlight beam on the door, and waited for you to arrive."

"Right." The Colonel hunched his shoulders pugnaciously. "I want volunteers to go into that hangar, but remember, the intruders are probably armed, and desperate."

"I'm going, Colonel," said Carl immediately.

"And so am I," chimed in Lon, half a second later.

Given permission, the two Legionaires moved slowly to the open hangar doorway, followed by three khaki-clad men armed with sub-machine guns. Carl slipped through the doorway, snapping on the electric light switch just inside. The hangar was instantly flooded with light, which was reflected dazzlingly from the gleaming metal sides of the huge, torpedo-shaped rocket standing on its tail-fins at the centre. Two men were bending over one of the fins, and a third, some distance away, was levelling an object in his hands at the nose of the rocketship.

"Get 'em," snarled the Major.

The two men straightened like puppets jerked erect on strings; one of them whipped a gun from his pocket. There was a stab of lemon-yellow flame and a muffled report, and a bullet hammered past Carl's

head and thudded into the wall of the hangar. Dropping on one knee, the Italian squeezed the trigger of his revolver in reply; he fired twice, and the gun-armed intruder spun around and pitched, arms outflung, to the concrete floor. The other intruder yelled something and threw up his hands in surrender.

Lon, meanwhile, had sprinted across the hangar and tackled the third man. The object this intruder had been pointing at the nose of the rocket crashed to the floor; its owner dropped beside it as the young Major hauled off and let go with a left-cross to the side of his jaw.

The tommygunners covered the intruders until several hefty Legion provosts arrived and handcuffed them. The wounded intruder, under guard, was taken to the drome hospital for treatment. Colonel Jackson ordered the provosts to take the two uninjured intruders to his office, then turned to Carl.

"Good shooting, Captain," he congratulated the Italian. "And my respect to you, too, Major. What was that fellow pointing at the rocket?"

"I didn't have time to look," Lon replied. "I thought he might pull a gun, so I didn't waste any time laying him cold. Let's go and see what it was."

The three men walked across the hangar to the spot where Lon had floored the third intruder; Carl stooped and picked up the dark object lying on the floor. As he did so, his lips thinned into a hard line.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the Colonel. "It's a press camera! So that's what these fellows were—newspaper men." His expression grew grim. "Well, the paper that sent them is going to be rather sorry. I warned the newspapers and television stations this was strictly hush-hush. Come on up to my office and we'll find out where they're from."

Carl, carrying the battered camera, followed the others out of the hangar. So Zelie had broken her word, after all, and sent men from her paper to the drome to find out what she wanted. If it came out that he had dined and wined with her earlier that evening, the Legion officials might suspect that he had given her the tip-off. He was still worrying about this when they arrived at the Colonel's office in the administration building.

The two prisoners, handcuffed, were standing at one side of the room. Armed and efficient-looking provosts were standing beside and also behind them. One of them Carl recognised as Dean Hartney, a photographer employed by the "Evening Star," where Zelie also worked. The other man, however, was a stranger to him.

"I suppose," said the Colonel grimly, "you men realise the seriousness of what you have done. You will both be charged with breaking into premises prohibited to the public. That will be sufficient to hold you on for a while. Later, though, other charges will be preferred against you. Carrying arms, offering violence, being in possession of information contrary to the Official Secrets Act." He paused, letting that sink in. "It is my duty to warn you men that you need not say anything, and that anything you do say may be taken down and used as evidence at your trial." Again he paused. "Well, have you anything to say?"

The newspaper photographer spoke.

"My name's Dean Hartney, sir. I'm attached to the *Star*. I asked your office for permission to photograph the Venus rocket, but they refused to give me a permit. So I came along to-night to take one secretly. When I arrived, the sentry was already unconscious on the ground. I crept inside, fitted a flashlight to my camera, and was about to take a shot when the lights came on and Major Wynter knocked me down. I heard the other men moving around the rocket, but I'm not connected with them. And that's the honest to God truth."

The Colonel regarded him thoughtfully. Then he said, "I'm inclined to believe you, Hartney. I think you were only after a photograph for your paper, but you've taken too much on yourself. You'll spend the night in the guardhouse and I'll see you again in the morning. Take him away."

When two of the provosts had led the crestfallen cameraman from the office, the Colonel turned to the second man, who looked back at him sullenly.

"And what have you to say?" the Colonel asked, perching himself on the edge of his desk.

"Nothing," snarled the prisoner.

"Indeed," said the Colonel mildly. "You were found in a prohibited area carrying a firearm. I'm also informed that, with your less fortunate companion, you attacked the sentry on duty outside the hangar and attempted to place a time-bomb under one of the tail fins of the rocket. That constitutes both espionage and sabotage. Do you still wish to remain silent?"

The prisoner hesitated. Then:

"You can't prove I assaulted your guard or put a bomb in there. I was a newspaper reporter, after a story, just like that other fellow."

The Colonel laughed, not a very pleasant laugh.

"A reporter, eh?" he repeated. "You were nothing of the sort. You are a spy and a saboteur, sent here by some foreign government to wreck the Venus rocket. Fortunately, you did not succeed. If that rocket had exploded with six of our Legionaires inside it, you would have faced six charges of deliberate murder." The Colonel paused, leant forward. "What's your name? Who paid you to come here to-night?"

The prisoner shook his head.

"I'm not saying anything more."

"Very well." The Colonel came to his feet again. "I sometimes regret we have made it unlawful to forcibly extract information. The old American third degree might have loosened your tongue. Take him to the guardhouse, Sergeant. I'll submit a report to Headquarters: they can decide what to do with him. Have him photographed and finger-printed and send the dope down to the records bureau. They may be able to identify him from their files."

When the prisoner had been removed by the provosts, the Colonel turned to the waiting Legionaires.

"It seems fairly obvious, gentlemen, that our prisoner and his wounded companion came here to-night to blow up the Voyager. We have foiled their little game, but, unless I'm a very bad judge, they'll make another attempt. As soon as they realise we have captured their agents, they'll try something else. Therefore it will be essential for you to leave as soon as possible, and—" He broke off as a telephone buzzed on his desk. "Excuse me, gentlemen." He lifted the receiver to his ear. "Yes? Colonel Grant speaking. Yes. Yes. I see. Well, thanks, Doctor; Keep me posted with further news, will you." Turning back to the Legionaires, he said: "That was Doctor Johnson at the drome hospital. The other man is being given an anaesthetic; they'll have to operate to get those bullets out of him. He wasn't carrying any papers, either."

"Is he bad, sir?" asked Carl.

"Serious, but not critical," replied the Colonel, "as the good doctor put it. One bullet in the right shoulder, another in the fleshy part of the thigh. As I remarked before, Captain Svengali, it was good shooting. Anyone else might have drilled him through the heart and closed his lips forever." The Colonel paused and grinned irreverently. "Well, Major, how soon can you be ready to take-off?"

Lon considered. "In' about an hour, I think, sir. Maybe less if we

hurry."

"No, an hour will do nicely, Major. Don't want you to rush things and perhaps overlook some important item. I'll tell the ground staff that the rocket will be taking off at——" He studied his watch, "at nine-thirty, shall we say?"

"Nine-thirty it is, sir."

"Right."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Lon and Carl entered the special hangar, where a scene of feverish activity was taking place. The rocket had been lowered by two cranes to a horizontal position and was now resting on eight sets of detachable trolleys. Two jeeps were in position to tow the rocket out on to the landing field; already the reinforced chains had been hooked up between the rocket's nose and the back of the jeeps. Mechanics had crawled inside the big tubes at the rocket's stern, giving them a last-minute checkover; technicians with electrical and magnetic instruments were running over the rocket's exterior, searching for flaws. At the far end of the hangar, the four other members of the *Voyager*'s crew were receiving injections from a Legion doctor.

"Stimulene," he explained, when Lon and Carl approached him. "To offset the shock of your initial acceleration. Only two c.c's."

Lon rolled back the sleeve of his gray tunic and waited calmly while the hypodermic was thrust into his upper arm. Then, with Carl, who had also been given an injection of the colourless drug, the young Major walked to the circular port of the rocket. One by one the five other Legionaires climbed in, receiving a handshake and words of congratulation from Colonel Grant. When Carl had gone through, Lon turned to the tribune. "Well, Colonel," he said, in the famous words of "Paddy" Finucane, "this is it." He gripped the Colonel's hand hard for a moment, then swung himself lithely through the port. Mechanics swung the circular door into position, hermetically sealing the six Legionaires inside the rocket. Lon passed through a second circular door, which turned the entrance into an air-lock, and entered a small cabin set up as a combined wireless and navigation room. Tony Lopez was already pinning a large-scale star-map to a table (which, like all the furniture in the rocket, was riveted to the floor), and Carl Svengali was sitting at his radio board, adjusting ear-phones to his dark head. A neon bulb winked on, and a voice spoke from the loudspeaker screwed to the wall.

"Colonel Grant speaking. Are you receiving me on board the *Voyager*?"

Carl snapped down a switch, twisted a dial among the bank of instruments before him, and spoke into a microphone. "Captain Svengali receiving, sir. Any orders?"

"You're coming through quite clearly, Captain," came the Colonel's voice from the loudspeaker. "Tell Major Wynter he had better take off as soon as the jeeps are detached. And keep in touch with me by radio as long as you can, Captain. You will probably have to switch to short and ultra short wave lengths as soon as you leave the atmosphere and enter the void."

Lon nodded to Carl and passed on into the control-room, which was situated in the nose of the rocketship. Settling himself comfortably in the bucketseat, he fastened the straps across his body, and glanced at the instruments set before him. The delicate needles trembling in the luminous dials informed him that the vessel was being towed out on to the field by the jeeps. There was a slight jar, and grating noises in front of him as the towing chains were detached. A red light winked

on; Lon reached forward and switched on the inter-communications radio.

"Captain Svengali speaking, Major. The Colonel says the jeeps are clear and you can take-off."

"Thanks, Captain." Lon screwed the dial to another number, and spoke into a microphone. "Major Wynter calling Corporal McAdam. All set in the engine room for a take-off, Corporal?"

"Aye, sir, all ready."

"Right." Opening the dial so that his voice would be communicated to all sections of the ship, Lon said, "Prepare yourselves for the take-off, gentlemen. Zero hour will be in thirty seconds."

He cut the switch and the red light winked out.

Then, trying to forget there was enough concentrated fuel in the rocket's entrails to blow him to Kingdom Come, if the ignition failed to work correctly, Lon placed his fingers on a row of nickeled acceleration keys.

The needle of his chronometer ticked off twenty seconds, twenty-five, twenty-eight . . .

Like a pianist playing a harmonic combination of chords, Lon's slender fingers flowed across the keys. There was a muffled roar, a sudden lurch, and they were off!

### CHAPTER III.

The **Voyager**, a hundred and twenty feet of gleaming metal, sped upward into the night sky, blazing a trail across the stars. A column of scarlet flame blasted downward between its four tail-fins; blazing rocket gas which, exploding in the combustion chamber, forced the spaceship higher and higher into the heavens. Revving the mighty semi-turbine engines to their full speed, Lon quickly built up acceleration. In forty seconds they had reached an altitude of twenty miles and were about to enter the warm ozone layer in the atmosphere which reflects sound.

Had the ship not been built like a thermos flask, with a double hull from which all air had been exhausted, the crew would have felt a terrible, numbing cold. The temperature here was about minus 110 degrees F. But the vacuum between the two reinforced walls kept out both heat and cold, like a thermos flask, and maintained the temperature inside the ship. The **Voyager** was also equipped with heating and refrigeration apparatus, in case the frightful cold of the void or the tremendous heat near the Sun created a flaw in their temperature controls.

Had they taken off in daylight, the sky would slowly have become a deeper blue shading into a rich indigo. Shooting upward now through air that was so rarefied it could have been called a low vacuum, the **Voyager** reached a region 45 miles above the earth, and electrical phenomena began. Lon glanced through the big reinforced glass porthole set at one side of the control-room and watched the coloured streamers of the Aurora Borealis dancing in the jet black sky.

Then a shock ran through the rocketship.

Ghostly blue flames, like St. Elmo's Fire, danced about the metal fittings; green sparks crackled on his instrument board, while the dials and meters worked by magnetism suddenly went crazy and slanted their needles at all angles. At the same time he felt a queer tingling all over his body, like dozens of slight electric shocks. He realised that they must be passing through highly-ionised Heaviside-Kenelly layer, where

electrons from the sun first meet air-molecules and ionise them. A red light blinked on, and Captain Carl Svengali's voice sounded in Lon's earphones.

"Svengali calling, Major. I've lost contact with Canberra Drome. And all my radio equipment seems to have gone berserk. What's happening?"

Lon switched on his inter-comm. transmitter.

"Keep your hair on, Carl," he chuckled. "This is the Heaviside layer, 55 miles up. It is this reflecting layer which makes wireless waves travel round the globe instead of passing straight out into space. It's a sort of blanket around the Earth; it chopped off your broadcast to Canberra like a hot knife cutting a pound of butter in half. We'll be out of it soon, and the sparks will stop flying round the metal parts of the ship, but I'm afraid radio contact with the Earth has ended for us now."

"I get it, Major," replied the Italian. "But listen: those dwarfs were able to send messages back to Venus from the Earth. Why can't we send messages from out in space to the Earth, then?"

"I don't know, Carl. Maybe the dwarfs have perfected a more penetrating wavelength than we have yet. Anyway, try sending with ultra short wave; you might get your beam through the Heaviside layer that way. And send it Mt. Everest Base—its height may help us a little."

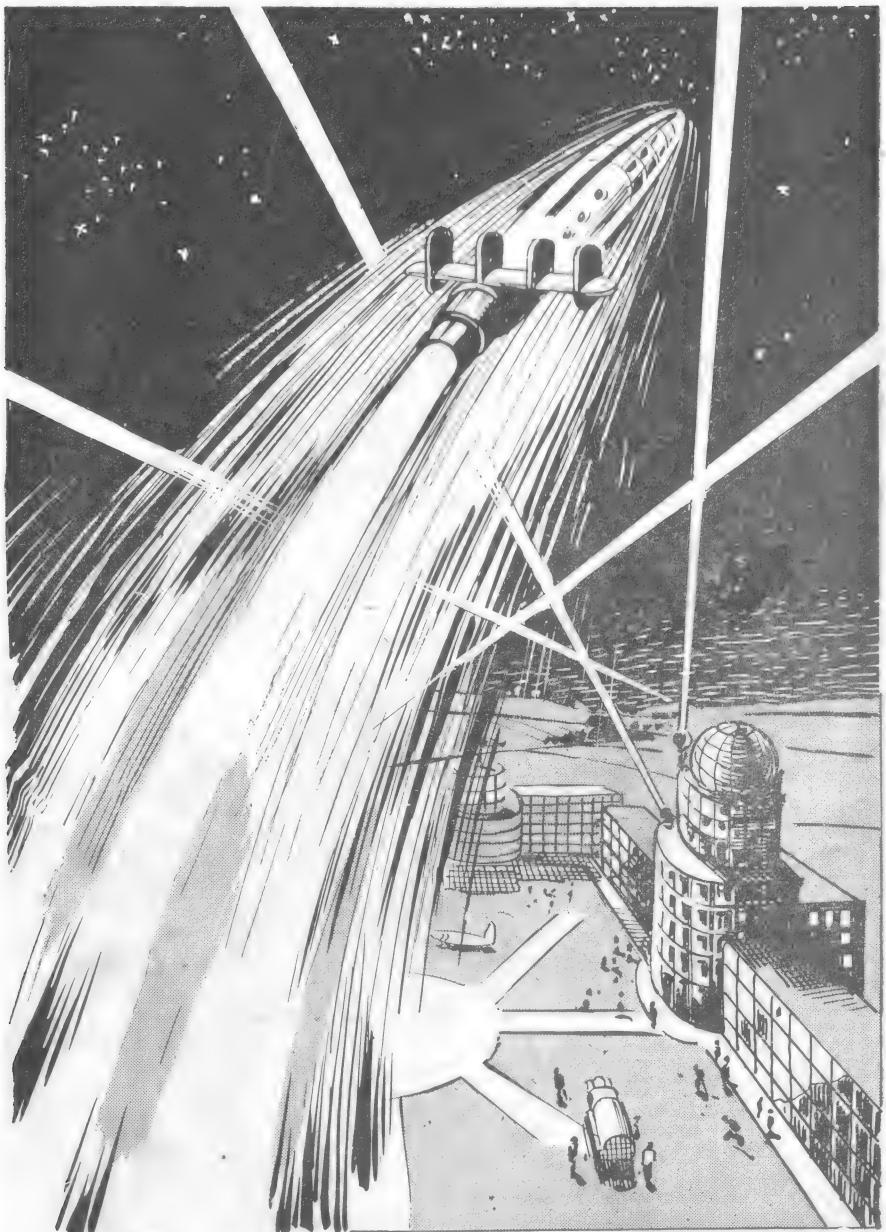
"Okay, Major," Carl assented, and switched off.

When the altimeter showed that the *Voyager* had reached a height of 70 miles, the electrical disturbances faded away, and Lon realised they had passed through the Heaviside Layer. The atmosphere extended, he knew, for some 500 miles, but in a very attenuated form. At 180 miles they would meet a second ionised layer, but as they had passed the Heaviside without suffering any danger, Lon did not fear that the next ionised zone would provide any trouble.

He now concentrated on increasing their speed to "escape velocity." A bullet fired straight up into the air will reach a certain height and then curve back towards the Earth. This is because the gravitational pull of the Earth pulls it down. But if a bullet were fired with sufficient muzzle-velocity to overcome the influence of gravity, the bullet would then fly off into the void. The *Voyager* was only a bigger bullet, with men inside it, and if its speed could be increased to 25,200 miles per hour (or seven miles a second) it would similarly overcome the influence exerted by the Earth's gravitational pull, and zoom off into space. Actually its velocity had to be a little more than 7 m.p.s., because the air, rarefied as it was, still created a certain amount of resistance.

Once they got out into space, free of gravity, the rocket would simply "free-wheel" along, so Lon did not mind using up nearly a third of his liquid fuel to reach "escape velocity." Playing the nickeled keys, like a typist working flat out, the young Major fed richer juice to the engines throbbing in the entrails of the ship.

An hour passed . . . The *Voyager* was safely beyond the second ionised layer and flying at a height of 400 miles above Mother Earth. The difficult task of escaping the gravitational pull was over; soon the rocket-ship would leave the last fringe of Earth's atmosphere and plunge into space. The air outside now was so rare that the gauge on Lon's instrument board recorded zero—it was not delicate enough to measure in twenty decimal points. The external temperature meter recorded extreme cold; if one of the Legionaires stepped into the air-lock now and opened



**The Voyager, a hundred and twenty feet of gleaming metal, sped upward into the night sky.**

**Page 14     "Radio Record's" "SPACEWARD, HO!"**

the outer door he would be instantly frozen to death. Also, as the air-pressure outside was practically nil, the Legionnaire's body, used to a pressure of 14lb. to the square inch at sea-level, would explode, like a deep-sea fish brought to the surface back on Earth.

Lon cut off the rocket-motors and gradually the flames blasting from the *Voyager*'s tail died out, but the ship continued to plunge towards the Sun at seven and a half miles a second. At this rate it would take them roughly 42 days to reach Venus, which was about 26 million miles away. But the *Voyager* was well-stocked with concentrated food, and there would be plenty of work to be done, so the crew would be fed and kept occupied during the month and a half travelling in space.

Lon unbuckled the straps and got out of the bucketseat. Stretching his cramped limbs, he moved to the glass porthole and stared out at the "sky," which had become a black velvet curtain, dotted with brilliant stars which did not twinkle. It is our atmosphere which diffuses star-light and gives stars their twinkling appearance. To the left, the Moon hung like a huge ball, part of it illuminated with a dull ashen light, the remainder dark. Lon could see quite clearly the great and small craters on the moon's surface, also its mighty plains and rugged mountain ranges. He could also see distinctly the shadows cast by the high cliffs of some of the craters. From his student days at Chichen-Itza Base, Yucatan, he remembered the nightly astronomical classes; how he had gazed through a telescope at the moon and mapped its topography. Standing now at the porthole of the first Earth-built rocketship to fly into the void, he picked out certain craters—Aristotle and Tycho, which were no less than 50 miles in diameter—and remembered the names of certain of the plains (originally believed, because of their dark shading, to be seas). He saw the Mare Imbrium (the sea of storms), and the Mare Tranquilitatis (the sea of peace), and many others.

Then turning, he looked back at the Earth they had just left. It hung below them like a huge, coloured globe-map, its continents greenish-brown, its oceans inky blue. The arctic and antarctic ice zones stood out like the polar cap of Mars seen through an ordinary telescope from Earth. Searching the "sky," Lon managed to locate the crescent of the planet Jupiter, and also that of Mars. Venus he could not find.

"Star-gazing, Major?" a cheerful voice asked.

Lon turned from the porthole to see Tony Lopez, the South American centurion, standing at the doorway of the control-room.

"Oh, hullo, Tony. Finished figuring?"

"Yeah." Lopez tossed a pad on to the table in front of the bucket-seat. "I'm ready to take over now, if you like, sir. And may I congratulate you on our take-off: it was perfectly executed." He paused. "What's next on the programme, Major?"

"The next item on the agenda," replied Lon, "is an inspection of the ship, to be made by me. If you'll take over, Tony, I'll be on my way."

"Right, Major."

The South American slipped into the bucketseat and fastened the straps loosely across his body—there was no rocket acceleration to be countered now, but regimental orders had to be observed, and there was a strict rule about safety belts. Lon had unbuckled his gunbelt for comfort while piloting; now, also in accordance with orders, he strapped it on and patted the DeLameter hanging in its holster on his right hip. Then, with a nod to Lopez, he quitted the control-room and entered the next compartment, where Captain Carl Svengali was tinkering with a

Morse key. On the panel before the Italian, a green bulb was winking.

"Hullo, Carl—getting something?"

blank television screen screwed to the wall. "No, Major, not a buzz. All signals on the general broadcast band faded as we crossed the Heaviside Layer, and the short-wave transmitter went to sleep when we passed the second ionised zone. I picked up some short-wave stuff not long ago, just a few words, but even that's off the ether. I've been sending to Mt. Everest Base for ten minutes in Morse with an ultra-short wave, but they don't acknowledge. Either my transmission isn't getting through, or my receiver isn't picking up their acknowledgment."

"Well," commented Lon. "It looks like you're in for a restful trip. If the radio's on the blink, your only duty is to act as Air Gunner, and I don't imagine we'll meet another rocketship out here in the void."

"We might meet one of the dwarf's ships, Major, and it might prove hostile."

"That's true," Lon admitted. "Let me know if you pick anything up, Carl. We know that the dwarfs were able to send messages to Venus, and you may intercept one of their communications. There are still many Venusian spies back on Earth, posing as ordinary human dwarfs, you know."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n." grinned the Italian, and returned to his ether-scanning.

Lon left him to it and passed through the eating and sleeping quarters, exchanging a few words with Patrolman Oleg Gottfrieg, who was brewing some coffee in the kitchen. Then he entered a larger cabin set up as a combined laboratory, observatory, dispensary and ship's hospital. Doctor Wallace Kew was sitting with his eye glued to a telescope, operating a telescopic stellar camera at the same time. Though Kew was technically under Lon's orders, Lon did not think it would be necessary to issue commands to him. He had worked with the First Legion Lieutenant before.

"Star-gazing, Doc.?" he asked, copying Centurion Lopez's opening words to him in the control-room.

"Yes," said Kew, without looking round. "Just got an excellent shot of the lunar region around the crater Copernicus. Flying in the void, without any atmospheric conditions to play havoc with telescopic observation, is a veritable paradise for astronomers." He paused. "Do you want me for something? Is one of the crew spacesick, or something?"

"No, Doc. We're all O.K. Don't let me disturb your work," said Lon, and passed on into the engine room.

He found Corporal McAdam, with his coat off and hands covered with black rubber gloves, poking into a transformer with a spanner. Around him stood the great, semi-turbine rocket motors, which mixed two liquid fuels and conveyed them to the giant combustion chamber at the rear of the ship. Here the fuels were exploded by means of an ignition, and the expanding gases, shooting out through the rocket-jets, thrust the vessel forward by reactive force.

"All satisfactory, Corporal?" Lon asked.

The Scot straightened, scratched the back of his ginger hair with one end of the spanner.

"I don't know, Major," he said, after a pause. "There's something wrong somewhere, but I can't jest put my finger on the trouble. I think maybe something blew out when we took off; there was a greater strain than ye expected with that initial acceleration, I ken."

Lon nodded, seriously.

"I thought I felt something give when I clapped on speed. See what you can do about it, Corporal. We shan't be needing our motors for about a week now, so you'll have plenty of time to poke around. It wouldn't be very pleasant, though, to have our motors blow up when we switched them on again, a million or so miles out in space!"

Remembering that Gottfrieg had been busy brewing coffee, Lon went back to the eating quarters. As he entered the kitchen, he saw the fair-haired Patrolman pouring the hot black quid into a number of cups.

"That sure smells good, Oleg," the Major remarked. "How about a biscuit to go with it? Say no if it can't be done—you're in charge of food-rationing, y' know."

The Patrolman grinned.

"Can do, Major. I hope we can get some fresh meat and vegetables from the dwarfs, though, when we get to Venus. We're going to be pretty tired of canned meat and condensed food." He walked across the kitchen and turned the knob of the pantry-door. "But then," he added, "if the Venusians are so terrifically advanced scientifically, they might live on pills and things, and we won't get our steak and eggs!"

With that, he opened the pantry-door and went to step into the little closet. Then he stopped, jaw sagging, his eyes fixed on something inside the pantry.

"What's the matter, Oleg?" Lon asked quickly, but the blonde Patrolman did not answer. He merely waved to Lon to come and see for himself, which was a breach of Legion discipline, but who cared, anyway? The Major stepped swiftly across the kitchen and gazed over Oleg's shoulder into the pantry. Then he let out a sharp exclamation.

"A stowaway! How the hell did she get there?"

For, lying on the pantry floor, in a curious heap, was a woman of about twenty-five, whose auburn-tinted hair hung in confusion about her shoulders. Stooping quickly, Oleg lifted the girl to her feet, but she remained limp in his arms. Lon noted that she was surprisingly pretty, despite the fact that the blood had drained from her face, leaving her complexion a sickly white. The rest of her was too well-shaped for the peace of mind of man.

"What will I do with her?" gasped Gottfrieg.

"Take her to the ship's hospital," ordered Lon quickly. "She obviously needs medical attention; we had injections of stimulene before we took off, remember, and without that drug being circulated through your body, you'd undergo a terrific strain with the acceleration we built up. There's plenty of time to question her later; she can't get off this ship. You'd better take her to Doctor Kew right away!"

"Aye, aye, sir," acknowledged Gottfrieg, and, slipping his free arm under the girl's legs, he swung her aloft and hurried from the kitchen, Lon close on his heels.

A few moments later, while Gottfrieg was laying the girl on one of the three hospital beds, Lon made rapid explanations to Dr. Wallace Kew, who immediately took out his stethoscope and bent over the stowaway. Then he felt her pulse, lifted back one of her eyelids, and peered at the pupil. Straightening, he said, "She's suffering from shock, that's all. I'll give her an injection of saline and sugar—that'll bring her round. The goddam little fool! It would have been bad enough for a man to experience that take-off without previously having an injection of stimulene, but even so he could have stood it far better than a woman.

Despite all this modern talk about the equality of the sexes, a woman's constitution is nowhere near as strong as that of a man."

"But there's nothing seriously wrong, Doc.?" Lon asked, as Kew began filling a hypodermic.

"No, there's nothing organically wrong with her. Just shock, as I said." Baring the girl's arm, he slipped the nickel needle under her flesh and rapidly depressed the plunger. Then he withdrew the needle and swabbed the site of the injection with methylated spirit. "She'll be all right after she's had a rest, Major."

"Good." Lon frowned. "But I don't like having a woman on board, Doc. For one thing, our stores have been carefully rationed to feed six men 84 days: with an extra person on board, Oleg here is going to have to be mighty careful how he issues out the food. And another thing: the members of my crew are human beings—a woman here may cause certain trouble. And apart from ordinary jealousy, Legionaires are superstitious about women travelling in their crafts, just like the old submariners were. A wise commander humours them."

"Granted," said Kew, "but you can't push her out the air-lock and forget about her, you know."

Lon nodded, frowning.

"I realise that, Doc. Well, as soon as she comes to, give me a buzz on the inter-Comm. I'll pop down and question her. But," he added, gloomily, "even if she's a foreign spy wanted by the Legion, we can't turn back to Earth. Now we've started, we're going on to Venus—and she'll have to come with us!"

Before leaving the hospital compartment, the young Major turned for a moment to look again at the girl. Colour had crept back into her cheeks, her lips were growing red again. Lon cursed under his breath: first the engine trouble, and now a woman stowaway (who was damnable attractive into the bargain).

What else had the Faes in store for him?

#### CHAPTER IV.

Lon went forward to the wireless room, where Carl was still tinkering with his transmitter. Seeing the Major, Carl removed his hand from the Morse key, pulled off his earphones, and took a packet of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his gray tunic.

"Smoke, Major?"

"Thanks, Carl." Lon helped himself to a cigarette, waited until Carl had placed one between his lips, then struck a match. "Seeing as you're second-in-command, Captain Svengali," Lon continued, "you may as well share my troubles."

"Troubles?" Carl looked surprised. "I didn't know we had any troubles; I thought everything was going sweet and easy."

"Well, it isn't." Lon perched himself on the nearby chart table, and took a careful pull at his cigarette. "There are two very large flies in the ointment, Carl. First of all, McAdam informs me that something is wrong with our rocket motors. Of course, we don't have to use any power for about a week now, but there's a chance he may not have located the trouble by then. That, however, is on the lap of the gods; we'll just have to wait and see." He paused, flicked ash to the metal floor. "The second fly, Carl, is a stowaway: a rather attractive young woman whom Gottfrieg just discovered hiding in the pantry. She was unconscious—who wouldn't be, taking off without an injection of stimu-

lene? I took her down to Kew's room and he's given her a needle to counteract shock."

Carl listened carefully to all this, and then asked a question.

"This stowaway, Major—has she got red hair?"

Lon looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, she has. How did you know?"

Instead of explaining, Carl asked another question. "Did she have hazel-coloured eyes, Major?"

"I didn't notice her eyes."

"Oh." Carl blew a smoke-ring, and put another through it. "But she was a pretty kid, you say?"

"Rather attractive." Lon paused, looking sharply at the Italian. "Look here, Carl—do you know something about this? Great Scott! you didn't help her stow away on the ship, did you?"

"Hell, no!" exclaimed Carl quickly. "But I've got a damn good idea who she might be, and how she might have got on to the ship. One of the three men we caught at the hangar last night was Dean Hartney, a photographer from the 'Evening Star.' Colonel Grant said he thought the other two men were separate from Hartney; were, in fact, spies."

"So I gathered," Lon agreed. "But what's that got to do with our lady passenger?"

"Just this, Major. Last night I had supper with a girl reporter named Zelie Lambeth, who works on the same paper as Dean Hartney. Zelie is quite a pretty kid, with hazel eyes and ginger hair—that is, auburn hair," Carl hurriedly corrected himself. "It's possible that Zelie went with the photographer to the hangar. When the alarm was raised, she slipped inside the ship and secreted herself in the pantry. Dean, when he was caught, naturally said nothing about Zelie."

"Sounds plausible, Carl," Lon admitted. "Except for one thing: how did this Zelie woman know we were taking off last night?"

Carl explained. He told the Major how Zelie had tried to "pump" him about the Venus voyage while they were supping the previous night. Zelie, it seemed, had obtained her information from a young mechanic at the drome who was: (a) fascinated by the pretty girl reporter, and (b) unable to hold his liquor. Getting the youngster drunk, Zelie had extracted all the details she wanted about the flight.

"Yes, but how did she know we had put the starting time back to midnight, instead of dawn?" Lon asked; but here Carl shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me, Major. Your guess is as good as mine . . . You'll have to ask her that when she comes round. By the way, while she's still asleep, hadn't I better go down to Kew's room and see if she is Zelie Lambeth?"

"Go ahead," said Lon. "I'll watch the wireless for you; though—" He grinned. "I don't think it needs too much watching. The damn thing's gone dead."

Carl hurried from the radio room, returning in several minutes' time. His expression had hardened, foreboding trouble for someone.

"Well?" asked Lon.

Carl heaved a sigh. It's her, all right, Major—Miss Zelie Lambeth, journalist, employed by the 'Evening Star.' Don't be too hard on her, Major: she stowed away just to get a scoop for her paper, a first-hand description of the first man-made voyage to another planet."

"The girl isn't on trial, Carl; I'm not the judge; and you're not the counsel for her defence," Lon pointed out. "However, I'm satisfied she isn't a spy—I accept your word that she is a newspaper woman after

a story, and I know how reporters thirst after news. But, by stowing away on the *Voyager* she has gone a step too far—I hate to think what the courts will do with her when we get back to Earth."

"So do I," said Carl, with a grimace. "I warned her to keep her nose clean, Major, but the little idiot didn't listen to me." He shrugged expressively. "Nothing matters to Zelie except her newspaper; she'd go to any lengths to bring home a scoop—"

Lon looked at the Italian through a drifting cloud of blue-grey smoke. From the bowels of the ship there sounded a deep-throated growl as McAdam switched on one of the motors and watched its crank-shaft turning, then he cut off the power and the noise died away. Lon leaned forward, and said abruptly, "You're not in love with this woman, are you, Carl?"

Carl stared at the Major for a second, then vigorously shook his head. "Hell no," he gasped. "I'm just friendly with her, that's all. I've taken her out a few times, to dances and such like, but there's nothing serious between us. Well," he amended, "not on my side, anyway."

"But she may have ideas about you. I see." Lon regarded the glowing tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. "Sorry I had to ask a personal question, Carl, but I've got to be absolutely certain of the ground I'm treading over. A woman on board a rocketship with six men is bad medicine. I only hope—" He broke off as a red light blinked on. It was Doctor Kew calling him on the inter-comm. Lon spoke into a microphone. "Yes, Doc., Major Wynter here. What's that you say?—Oh, the girl's regained consciousness, has she. Right, I'll come straight down."

Rising, he ground out the stub of his cigarette and prepared to leave, but Carl suddenly caught him by the arm.

"Hold on, Major," said the Italian, quickly. "I know I've no right to tell you what to do—but you won't be too hard on her, will you?"

Lon looked steadily into Carl's face, then laughed softly and punched him gently in the solar plexus. "Don't worry, Carl: I'm not going to eat her. I feel like screwing her goddam neck, but I'll probably end up just giving her a talking to."

Carl looked relieved. "Thanks, Major. She's slightly scatterbrained—but she means well."

Zelie was sitting on the side of the bed, sipping a hot cup of coffee, when Lon reached the ship's small hospital. She surveyed him coolly as he came through the doorway, her eyes resting momentarily on the gold insignia on his coat lapel. Then, without giving him a chance to say a word, she scored the first victory in the ensuing battle by speaking first in a low, musical tone.

"Why," she observed, brightly, "you must be Major Wynter, the V.C. winner. They certainly picked a good man to command this expedition."

"Yes," said Lon, who was not susceptible to flattery, "and they also picked a good crew—of six men. I wasn't informed that a woman would be on board, Miss Lambeth."

Zelie raised demure eyebrows.

"So you know my name, Major. I see Carl's been telling family secrets."

Lon leant against the metal wall and looked at her with cold, calculating eyes.

"We might as well skip the by-play, Miss Lambeth," he said. "The

fact is that you're a stowaway, and a damned nuisance as well. You broke into the hangar at Canberra Drome with a cameraman named Dean Hartney, in order to get a story and photographs of something banned by the Legion Censor. For two pins I'd put you under close arrest and have you confined for the rest of the journey. As it is, I'm not going to be so strict. I realise the motive which prompted you to take this extremely foolish action. Captain Svengali tells me you're a rather hot-headed reporter——”

“Really?” Zelie put in.

“...and that you're keen to get a first-hand description of our flight.” continued Lon coldly. “Well, that's okay with me, Miss Lambeth. You're quite at liberty to take notes and write your story, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait until we get back to Earth before you see it\* in print—and even then the Censor might kill it. You see, Miss Lambeth, even if I felt like letting you send your stories back to Earth, it would be impossible. Our radio transmitter went dead the moment we crossed the Heaviside Layer.”

“Oh.” Zelie looked disappointed.

“Since you're on board,” Lon went on, “there isn't much I can do about it. The courts will deal with you when we get back. But, so long as you're on this rocketship, I want you to realise this is strictly a military mission, not a sight-seeing jaunt for journalists!”

Zelie put down her coffee-cup and surveyed him steadily. “I understand perfectly, Major. Just what are you going to do with me?”

“What can you do?” Lon countered.

She shrugged. “Oh, I can cook, and make beds . . . and I did a little nursing before I took up journalism.”

“Very well, then. You can spend part of your time helping Patrolman Gottfrieg in the kitchen and tidying up the living quarters, and part of it assisting Doctor Kew here. I'll see that portion of the sleeping compartment is curtained off for your use.” He paused, then went on grimly: “And I must impress upon you, Miss Lambeth, that both the wireless room and the control room are 'out of bounds' to you. I've got a good team of men on board, and if I see or hear of you interfering with any of them, by Heavens, I'll put you in irons for the rest of the voyage!”

Zelie uttered a hard little laugh.

“Don't worry, Major. I've not the slightest desire to make love to your precious Legionaires—I came along to get a story, and that's all I'm interested in.”

“I hope so,” said Lon, and left it at that.

On the following day (or rather, sixteen hours later: there was no “night” or “day” in space), Captain Carl Svengali found Zelie alone in the kitchen, and fell into conversation with her. Gottfrieg was busy in the engine-room, helping McAdam wind new wire on a transformer, so the two were alone.

“You blasted little fool,” snapped Carl, without even saying hullo. “I told you to keep out of this—now you're in for a couple of years' gaol, if I know the courts back on Earth. Don't you value your life above your damned newspaper?”

“No,” said Zelie calmly, “I don't, Carl. And I rather you didn't speak to me at all, if you can't speak civilly. It's my pigeon, not yours. I'm the only person who'll get into trouble for stowing away; you've got nothing to worry about.”



The burly Scot was thrown half-way across the room.

"I wasn't worrying about myself," said Carl, taking a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. "I was thinking about you, damn you! I don't want to see you shoved into the guardhouse." He held out the packet. Zelie looked at him thoughtfully, then helped herself to a cigarette. "And what's more," added Carl, as he struck a match, "if any of the other men on board start getting fresh with you, let me know. I'll soon put a stop to that."

Zelie laughed.

"That's rather nice of you, Carl—but, well, do I look worried?"

"No," Carl admitted, drawing at his cigarette. "I guess you can look after yourself. But still, if anything crops up, let me know."

"Thanks, Carl. I appreciate that." She blew a long plume of smoke at the metal ceiling, and dropped on to a nearby chair. "Tell me, Carl, what's wrong with Major Wynter?"

"Huh?" Carl looked puzzled.

"I said, what's wrong with Major Wynter?"

"I don't catch on," said Carl, still perplexed. "Nothing's wrong with him, so far as I know. Why—does he look ill?"

"Don't be silly, Carl. You know perfectly well what I mean. Why is he so cold, and . . . and inhuman? He treats me as if I had smallpox, or something. He might at least be polite. He absolutely ignored me at breakfast."

"Well," replied Carl, reasonably, "can you blame him for not liking you? He's got enough worries on his mind as it is—the responsibility of five lives in his hands, as well as a dozen problems to face—it isn't a game commanding a rocketship voyaging for the first time to another planet, you know. Finding you on board didn't make things any easier for him; you could hardly expect him to welcome you with open arms, my dear."

"I know." Zelie turned and stared moodily through the glass port-hole in the kitchen. Outside, a multitude of stars gleamed in the void. "But still, he could try to be more sociable. It doesn't relieve his worry being nasty to me. I wish he'd loosen up and smile at me occasionally."

Carl grinned crookedly. "Fallen for the Major, Zelie?" he asked.

"Don't be silly, Carl." Zelie tapped her cigarette impatiently. "Of course I haven't fallen for him! I just want him to act more like a human being and less like a robot, that's all." She paused, looked up in surprise. "Good God, Carl, you're not jealous, are you?"

"Why should I be?" Carl laughed harshly, and turned towards the door. "I haven't got a priority on you, Zelie."

The girl locked her fingers behind her neck, pushing back the auburn hair falling to her shoulders. She smiled at Carl, her lips lifted provocatively.

"But you'd like to have one, eh, Captain?" she asked, eyes gleaming.

Svengali did not answer. He held her gaze for a long moment, then swung abruptly on his heel and left the kitchen. As he made his way forward to the control-room, where Lon and Tony Lopez were consulting a star-map, the Italian was cursing himself for being a fool.

This was no time to fall for a woman!

## CHAPTER V.

Two weeks passed.

By now the *Voyager* had travelled one-third of its long trip, eating up approximately 583,200 miles a day (or rather, every 24 hours; there was no way of reckoning day and night in the void). Tension was growing aboard the rocketship; the men were becoming restless, and although young Major Wynter partly attributed this to the unusual conditions

they were experiencing, he had an idea at the back of his brain that Zelie was mainly the cause of the trouble. He did not go so far as to think she had deliberately provoked the men, else he would have had her locked up; but women on board a rocketship way out in space was bad medicine . . .

On the "afternoon" of the 14th "day"—that is, thirteen hours after the last winding of the chronometer — Corporal McAdam reported that he had re-wound his transformers and thereby obviated the cause of the engine trouble. The *Voyager* had drifted several points off its course, and, as the rockets could now be safely fired (so McAdam said), Lon was anxious to utilise rocket power and put the ship back on its true route. After a consultation with Tony Lopez, the ship's navigator, Lon went forward to the control-room, armed with a sheaf of notes and equations, settled himself comfortably in the bucket-seat, and pressed the button which rang a warning bell in the engine room. Then, resting his fingers on the bank of freckled acceleration keys, he played a brief syncopation of power.

With a low rumble the rocket motors awoke to life; the crankshaft began turning, fuel gushed from the compression tanks into the mixing globes and then hissed into the combustion chamber. As Lon's fingers danced over the shining keys, the ignition flared and the fuel exploded, flaming gas blasting out through the stern tubes.

Corporal McAdam, standing by the auxiliary switchboard in the engine room, watched the motors anxiously, like a fond parent seeing his son play football for the first time. Then suddenly he stiffened, for a full second he stood petrified, staring at a motor which had gone mad, then he made a wild grab for the inter-comm. microphone.

"Major Wynter," he yelled. "Cut off!"

But now it was too late to stop the motors. The Corporal could see the explosion coming; hear it in the deep and powerful throb of the dynamos; feel it in the vibrations which shook the floor and walls of the rocketship and toppled tools from their shelves. Only a few seconds before, McAdam had seen the big glass tubes light with a greenish glow, glanced sidewise at the dynamo as it hummed into action and set its brushes painting vivid blue arcs in the air. He had seen the needles of his gauges swing slowly around the dials; then quicken, warningly—

It came! The bumble-bee drone of the motors rose abruptly to a shrill mosquito whine; the dynamo snarled in protest as it took on an additional load; the glass tubes shattered and hissed dark brown fumes; sparks showered from the transformers; half-a-dozen wires disappeared in puffs of smoke and flashes of flame. There was a titanic roar, like a monster in agony—

The motors blew up even as McAdam's freckled hand caught the auxiliary switch and jerked it out of contact. The burly Scot was thrown half-way across the room, and, as he staggered to his feet, he felt a terrible, numbing cold seize his body. He found himself gasping for breath, then his knees buckled and he pitched, hands gripping his chest, to the metal floor.

In the control-room, with the noise of the explosion still ringing in his ears, Lon reached out quickly, switched the inter-comm. transmitter to "general call," and said into the microphone: "Emergency! All hands! Stand well clear of doorways." He waited a few moments to give his men time to get clear, then tugged down a red-painted lever; with a hissing noise metal screens slid across all the doorways in the ship, sealing off each compartment. If any part of the hull had cracked with the explosion, only that particular room would lose its air—the remainder of the ship would be safe. Lon drew a quick breath and wiped his fore-

head. It was damp with perspiration.

He picked up the microphone again. "All hands please report. Are you all right, Captain Svengali?"

A moment's hesitation, then Carl's voice: "Svengali reporting, Major. Yes, I'm all right, and so is Centurion Lopez—we're together in the wireless room. What on earth happened?"

"No time for questions now, Carl," Lon snapped. "I want to find out how the others are." He paused briefly. "Patrolman Gottfrieg, are you all right?"

Another pause; then: "Yes, Major, I'm all in one piece, and so is Miss Lambeth, who's here in the kitchen with me. All we got was a shaking-up."

"Good," Lon acknowledged. "How about you, Doctor?"

Kew replied that he was unharmed, but when Lon called through to the engine room, Corporal McAdam did not answer. The others listened, tense, as Lon repeated: "Calling Corporal McAdam! Answer please! Are you all right?" But still there came no answer.

With a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach, Lon looked at the instrument board. The gauge recording air-pressure in the engine room had fallen to zero: that meant the hull had been pierced, allowing the precious air to escape into the void—McAdam must have been asphyxiated in a second, dying among his exploded motors.

Lon noticed other things, too. The needle of the fuel gauge had slipped back several points, indicating that a large quantity of their fuel had been used up in the last few seconds. Simultaneously, the needle of the velocity meter had jumped around the dial, till now it recorded the incredible speed of 120 miles per second. Prior to the explosion the *Voyager* had been travelling at just on eight m.p.s. Lon realised what had happened; when he had switched on power the rocket-motors had taken the bit between their teeth and bolted. Gallons of compressed fuel had poured into the combustion chamber and a violent detonation had occurred, the expanding gases giving the ship a tremendous kick forward. Then the motors had blown out and fused; fuel had ceased to flow into the combustion chamber, but under that terrific hammer-blow, the *Voyager* was continuing to race forward through space at 120 miles a second.

It had taken them fourteen days to travel a little over nine million miles, a third of the distance to Venus, while speeding forward at just under eight miles per second. Now, however, they were galloping along at the greatly increased velocity of 120 miles per second, traversing 10,368,000 miles in a day. At this rate they would reach the orbit of Venus in 41 hours, a little under two days! In ordinary circumstances, Lon would have been pleased with the prospect of finishing the journey in so short a time, having expected to wait another twenty-eight days before reaching Venus. But now, as he observed the velocity meter and worked out figures in his mind, a cold shudder ran down his spine. With the motors wrecked he had no way of controlling or steering the *Voyager*. When they reached Venus they would not be able to turn and land on the planet—they would shoot past it and plunge on towards the Sun! Gradually, as they drew nearer and nearer to that flaming luminosity, the temperature inside the rocket would rise, until they would be literally "fried to a crisp." A slow, terrible death awaited the crew of the *Voyager* unless they could repair the motors and use their rockets to turn when they reached Venus.

"Doctor Kew," Lon called through the inter-comm. "Bolt the screen shielding the doorway between your compartment and the engine room.

The hull at the stern has cracked open, letting all the air in the engine room escape."

"And McAdam——?" asked the Doctor, whilst the others in the ship hung on Lon't answer. After a pause:

"I'm afraid the Corporal's gone west," said Lon quietly. "He died at his post, gentlemen, a Legionnaire to the last."

Zelie's voice sounded in the loudspeaker; she was obviously speaking from the kitchen microphone.

"Did—did, he die quickly, Major?" she asked.

"I'm certain his end was both swift and painless," Lon said. "Poor McAdam never knew what happened—it was all over in a second."

There was a short silence after this, each of the survivors busy with their own thoughts. Finally, Dr. Kew's voice sounded: "Screen bolted, Major."

"Good. Now I can unscreen all the other doors." Lon pushed back the red lever. With the exception of the one covering the doorway between Kew's room and the airless engine room, all the screens slid smoothly upward, and Lon issued another order: "Now that you've a free passage, all hands will come forward and assemble in the control room. There's an important matter to be discussed."

"Do you want me to come, too?" asked Zelie. (Lon had momentarily forgotten that he had forbidden her to enter the wireless or control rooms). He said, "All right, Miss Lambeth. This is an emergency—I want everyone on board, stowaway or not, to hear what I have to say."

One by one the four men and the girl entered the control room, Zelie looking around curiously, this being the first time she had been "forrad." They found Major Lon Wynter leaning with his back to the glass porthole, a cigarette smouldering between his fingers. His hair was ruffled and blood had dried on his forehead.

"Lon—you're hurt!" Zelie cried involuntarily, calling him by his Christian name for the first time.

"Oh, that." Lon fingered the cut, then dismissed it as superficial. "It's only a scratch—nothing to worry about." He paused, looked round questioningly. "By the way, are there any other casualties?"

Tony Lopez held up a bruised arm. "Just a bump, Major. I went head-over-heels when the explosion occurred." Carl offered a gashed hand, Dr. Kew a bruised shoulder. Zelie and Oleg had apparently escaped scot-free.

"Right," Lon went on crisply. "You can get Dr. Kew to dress your injuries later. As you've no doubt guessed, the rocket motors have blown up. That, however, isn't our main worry. Working in relays, two at a time, we could have repaired the damaged engines before we reached the orbit of Venus—if something unforeseen hadn't happened."

"What, more trouble?" groaned Carl.

"What's wrong now?" chimed in Tony. "Have we stopped or something?"

Lon smiled without humour.

"On the contrary, Tony, we have **started!** Until the blow-up we were cruising along at a nice, controllable rate—eight miles per second. But," he said grimly, "when the motors exploded, the ship was given a tremendous kick forward, and, under the impetus of the explosion, the *Voyager* has accelerated to a hundred-and-twenty miles per second."

"Hell!" Carl ejaculated. "That means——"

"It means," Tony cut in, "we'll be past the orbit of Venus in a couple of days, and we'll go shooting on towards the Sun. It'll get hotter and hotter each day, until——" He broke off, unable to describe what would

follow; but the others did not need telling.

Carl uttered a forced laugh, endeavouring to relieve the situation. "Well," he observed, "this only proves the old proverb about 'out of the frying pan into the fire.'"

"This is no time for weak jokes, Carl," Tony said coldly, oblivious to the fact that Svengali was his superior officer. "How long have we got, Major?"

"At a rough guess—a very rough guess—I'd say about eight days, Tony. After that it will be touch and go whether we'll be able to stand the heat. We may have even less time, if our refrigeration unit breaks down."

There was another silence, broken when Zelie drew a quick breath and muttered, "Falling into the sun—burnt to death—God! it's horrible—"

"Snap out of it, Miss Lambeth," Lon said curtly. "I suggest you go down to the kitchen and make some strong coffee; we could all do with a hot drink." When the girl had gone, he turned back to the Legionaires and said, "Well, gentlemen, you realise what sort of a fix we're in. I want a volunteer to come with me to the engine-room and assess the damage. Doctor Kew, I'm afraid, is excluded. No—don't argue, Doc—you're much too valuable in one piece. If any of us get hurt, you'll be ready to administer treatment." Kew saw the wisdom of this and reluctantly kept silent. "And now I want a volunteer," Lon concluded.

As he had expected, the three Legionaires stepped forward as one man. Lon smiled. "Thanks, boys—you're a grand team to work with. All right, Carl, I'll take you first. Tony and Oleg can work alternate shifts with us." Once more Lon became the formal commander. "All right, Centurion Lopez, you can take over in the control room. Patrolman Gottfrieg, get out two space-suits, Captain Svengali and I had better inspect the damaged motors right away; we haven't any time to lose."

Ten minutes later the two Legionaires were helped by Oleg into grotesque-looking space-suits. These were similar to the pressure suits worn by deep-sea divers and high-flying airmen, but were made of jointed metal, with helmets of reinforced glass. Cylinders of oxygen were strapped to the wearer's back and a steady stream of the vital gas was pumped through flexible tubes into the glass helmet. Turning on the oxygen taps, the two men closed the visors of their helmets, switched on their tiny radio sets, and passed through the first door of the air-lock. When Lon opened the second door, the air in the lock whistled out into the void, leaving the two men standing in a vacuum. Carl shivered: if the glass of his helmet cracked, or the oxygen pumps stopped operating, death would be instantaneous!

Like ocean divers exploring the hulk of a sunken ship, the two Legionaires clambered along the side of the rocketship. Fortunately, there was no wind in the void to blow them off. Reaching the stern of the ship, Lon switched on the powerful lamp hooked to his belt and began inspecting the damage. Two of the big rocket tubes had been cracked, and a gash, two feet wide and several yards long, ran along the hull. Squeezing through the opening formed by the twisted, buckled plates, Lon dropped to the engine room floor and swung the beam of his lamp around. It lit up the twisted, blackened shapes of the damaged motors: one crank-shaft had ripped free, scattering bolts, cog-wheels and pieces of broken casing in all directions; one compression tank had exploded, spraying blazing fuel over the walls and floor, which consequently were blackened; and the dynamo was now silent and motionless—a dead thing which, twenty minutes before, had triumphantly snarled its strength. A mighty backfire from the rocket tubes had crushed the combustion chamber like a concertina. In one corner of the engine room, huddled beneath the



The young Major hauled off and let go with a left cross to the side of his jaw.  
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auxiliary switchboard, was the body of Corporal McAdam.

Carl called Lon by radio. "Bit of a mess," he commented, flashing his torch around. Purposely, neither man referred to McAdam's body.

"We can repair it," said Lon confidently, though he didn't feel too optimistic. "First, we must cover that hole in the hull and pump in fresh air. Go back and get a welder, Carl; we'll have to heat those metal plates, bend them back into place, and weld 'em together."

Carl climbed through the gash in the wall, returning some minutes later with a portable welding machine. It was a Slavienoff electric arc welder, with a potential of 3,000 amperes. A set of insulated wires snaked back through the airlock, bringing current to the machine. Taking turns at operating it, Lon and Carl heated the twisted plates and forced them back to their original position. When this was finished, a narrow slit running along the wall was all that remained of the gash. While Carl worked the welder, its metal electrode gradually melted, furnishing drops of metal which filled the vacant space and formed a joint between the damaged plates. Four hours passed before the opening was completely sealed; then the Legionaires, who had worked from the outside of the ship (otherwise they would have trapped themselves in the engine room) re-entered the airlock into the **Voyager**.

"Phew!" gasped Carl, as Oleg lifted the glass helmet from his head. "It's damned hot inside these suits. Just like taking a Turkish bath, eh, Major?"

"Sure is, Cap'n," Lon agreed, wiping beads of sweat from his face. "As soon as you're cleaned up, we'll get the pumps working and fill the engine room with air. Then we can unscreen the door and start repair-work on those engines!"

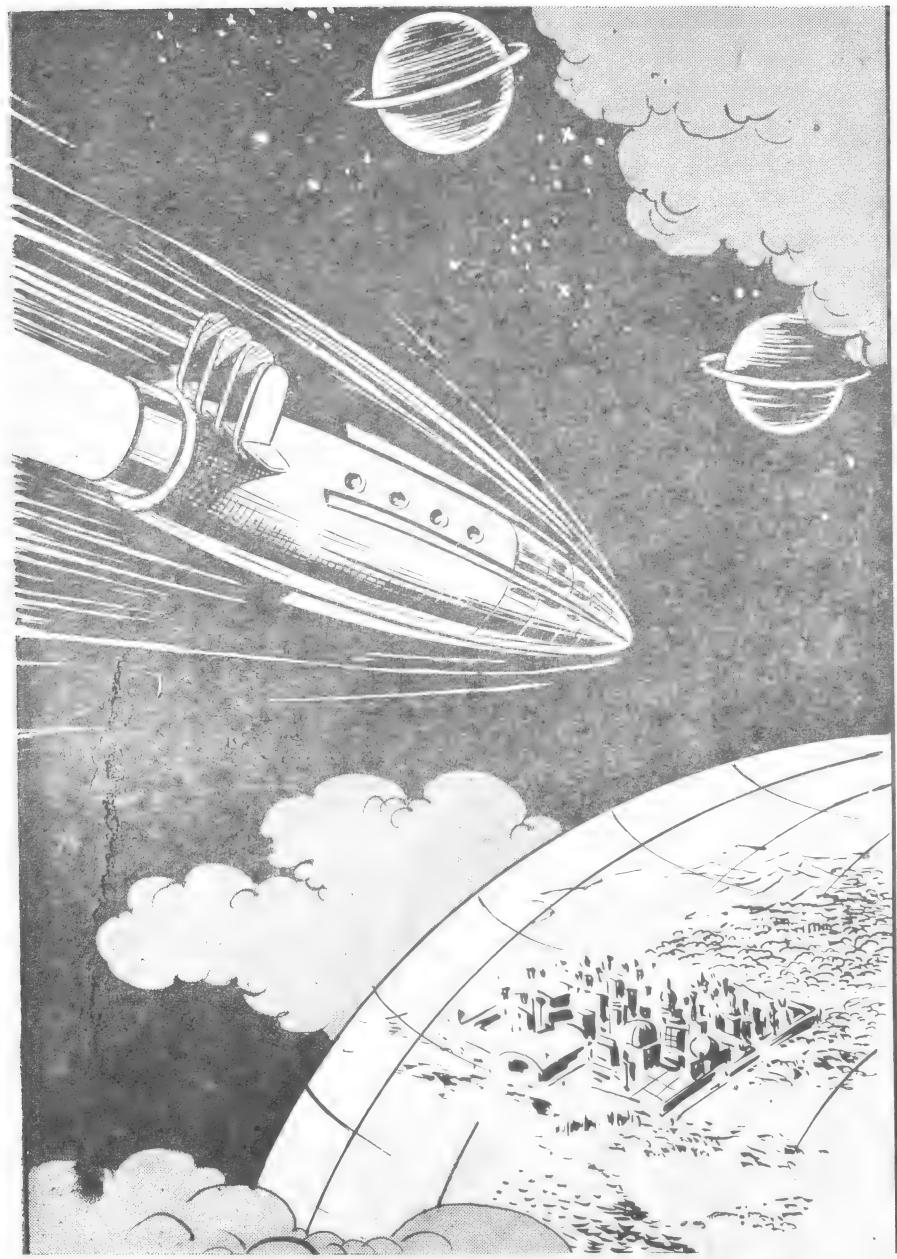
## CHAPTER VI.

As soon as fresh air had been pumped into the engine room, the door was unscreened, and McAdam's body removed to the ship's hospital. Dr. Kew made several injections of formalin into the cold flesh, following which the body was wrapped in a Legion flag and placed in a metal box, where it would be kept until they reached Venus. If the dwarfs' religion was orthodox, Lon intended that McAdam should be buried on that planet.

Zelie took over all kitchen and domestic duties, releasing Oleg Gottfrieg for full-time duty in the burnt-out engine room. The team of Gottfrieg for full-time duty in the burnt-out engine room. The team of four Legionaires, clad in overalls, immediately went to work. First, the scattered parts were collected, sorted out, and heaped in one corner, then the blackened walls were cleaned. Then began the hard task of repairing the wrecked machinery. Fortunately, the Legionaires had all done a certain amount of engineering at their training schools, and Gottfrieg volunteered the welcome information that recently he had made a special study of turbine rocket-motors for an examination. Three of the four synchronised motors were only superficially damaged, but the fourth was utterly beyond repair. It was from this one that the crankshaft had torn free, and the Legionaires had no alternative but to dismantle its remains. Carl wiped his grimy hands on a piece of cotton waste, and looked thoughtfully at the dismantled motor.

"Won't that impose a greater strain on the three other motors?" he asked, but Oleg shook his head.

"No. Don't forget that two of the stern tubes are out of use. When we repair the combustion chamber, we won't connect any output leads



He sighted the city on the coastline of the jungle-covered continent.

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to them, which will mean we'll be firing on two jets less, therefore, the combustion chamber won't require so much feeding. **Ergo**, three motors will suffice!"

Lon could not help grinning at the Shakespearean gesture which accompanied Oleg's last remark, but he was relieved all the same—he had been worrying about that angle himself . . .

Working in relays, it took them five days to complete the repair work on the engines. The *Voyager*, still flashing sunward at 120 miles a second, had travelled 51,840,000 miles since the explosion had catapulted it forward; altogether they had traversed 61½ million miles, leaving Venus far behind them, crossing the orbit of Mercury, and drawing to within 32 million miles of the Sun itself!

The heat had become almost unbearable, and the air inside the rocketship was difficult to breathe. The metal walls were also growing warm—had it not been for the combined cooling effects of the "thermos-flask" double hull and the refrigeration unit, the crew would doubtless have long since died. As it was, Lon felt that he was living in a furnace; it was hard to stop perspiring, and nigh impossible to sleep. Already Dr. Kew was giving them phenobarbital (½ gr.) to help them find rest.

As soon as the last connection had been made, Lon went to the control room, leaving Oleg and Carl in the engine room. "At the first sign of trouble, cut off power," Lon warned the Italian. Sitting in the bucketseat, the young Major waited fully five minutes before he found courage to press the firing keys—if the engines blew up a second time, there would be no hope of repairing them before the heat, intensifying hourly, killed them all. Reaching forward, he flicked on the inter-comm. transmitter. "All set below?" he asked, and back came Carl's answer, like an echo, "Ali set below, Major."

Gritting his teeth in an agony of anxiety, Lon pressed the nickelled keys. He saw a needle flutter across one of the dials on the instrument board, and hastily adjusted a knob. Smoothly, the motors began working, and the needle steadied at the middle of the dial. Lon sighed with relief; his brow was damp with cold sweat. In the engine room, Carl and Oleg watched breathlessly as the three synchronised motors awoke to life, watched their crankshafts spinning . . .

".....With gladness to the rip of gas exploding with flowing robust power." Saw the tubes light up and the gauge-needles quiver as fuel poured into the combustion chamber, was ignited, and blasted in flaming streams through the stern jets. A shudder ran through the *Voyager*, one of the rockets backfired with a report like a howitzer . . .

A dial-needle climbed to the red danger mark, hung there tantalisingly, then slid back to normal . . .

"We've made it!" Lon cried, his voice being carried to all quarters of the ship. "We're safe!" No one told him later that they had heard his exultant cry.

An hour passed. The instruments told Lon that the *Voyager* had turned and was now running parallel to the Sun, instead of plunging directly towards it. He played the right-hand bank of keys, feeding more power to the sunside rockets. The ship would now continue to fight the powerful pull of the Sun, and would turn back towards Mercury. After that it would be easy sailing to Venus.

When Centurion Lopez came for'ard to relieve him, Lon went to Dr. Kew's quarters. He found the doctor taking photographs through a telescope. "Hullo, Doc.—shooting sunspots?" Lon inquired.

Kew looked up.

"Oh, it's you, Major. No, I'm not photographing the sun—as a matter of fact, I don't know what I am photographing."

"Eh?" exclaimed Lon, wondering if the intense heat they had experienced had affected the doctor's mind.

Kew laughed. "I mean," he amended, "I don't know exactly what I'm photographing. It may only be a big meteor, but I believe it's a small planet."

"Oh, Mercury," said Lon, relaxing and feeling for a cigarette.

"No, not Mercury—that's the peculiar part of it. If you remember your Astronomy, you'll know that the secular motion of the perihelion of Mercury is greater than it should be. It, therefore, follows that either Mercury is acted upon by the gravitational pull of some unknown world or the intensity of gravity doesn't precisely follow Newton's law. Leverrier attributed the excess motion of Mercury's perihelion to a group of small planets between Mercury and the Sun."

"But," objected Lon, after lighting his cigarette, "Mercury is the innermost planet."

"Mercury is believed to be the innermost planet," Kew corrected him. "Occasionally, though, a dark object has been seen to cross the Sun. Photographs of the sun have never shown such a body, but several astronomers claimed its existence and named it Vulcan. I think it is this planet that I am photographing now."

"Well, then, congratulations," Lon exclaimed. "You have confirmed the existence of Vulcan. I'll record that in the log book. Gosh, won't the astronomers go mad when we get back? They'll organise an expedition just to cruise around photographing stars and nebulae."

"Probably," Kew laughed. "And perhaps—" He broke off, took several quick strides across the room, and caught Gottfrieg as the Patrolman fell through the doorway.

"What the hell?" Lon jumped to the doctor's help; together they lifted the unconscious Patrolman and laid him on one of the hospital beds. Kew undid Gottfrieg's tunic, pressed a stethoscope to his breast, and listened with knitted brows, while Lon stood by, watching anxiously. At last the doctor straightened.

"Well?" Lon demanded.

"I feared this," said Kew wearily. "Gottfrieg complained yesterday that he was suffering from dizziness and noises in the ears. This morning he had a vomiting fit and asked for something to settle his stomach. He made me promise not to tell anyone else—said the trouble would pass off in a couple of days."

"It was your duty to report it to me," said Lon, tersely. "It's essential that I know if one of my crew is sick."

Kew shrugged.

"You can put me under open arrest if you wish, Major. I admit I committed a breach of Legion Orders, but Gottfrieg thought you'd order him to bed if he reported he was ill. He said he knew more about rocket engines than the rest of you, and it was essential for him to keep on his feet."

"Yes, I know." Lon ground his cigarette savagely into an ashtray. "I realise why Gottfrieg wanted it kept quiet, and I admire him for it. But dammit, Doc., he may have had an infectious disease, and by keeping on his feet, as you put it, he might have endangered the health of the rest of the crew."

Kew moved to a cabinet and began filling a hypodermic syringe. "He may have," he said over his shoulder, "but he didn't. His trouble isn't contagious."

"All right, Doc., you win." Lon relaxed, looking at Gottfrieg's flushed face. "What's the matter with him, anyway?"

Kew squirted a few drops of liquid from the syringe, picked up a

cotton swab, and moved to the bed. Lon helped him to remove the Patrolman's coat. When the injection had been made, Kew straightened, and said, "He's got a touch of Meniere's disease, brought up by intense heat and exposure to the sun. It's a wonder the whole lot of you aren't down with it. But Gottfrieg comes from Norway, I understand; being fair-complexioned and used to a cool climate, the heat affected him most. We're both Australians—we wouldn't feel it so much; nor would Svengali or Lopez, they both come from warmer climates."

"I see. Tell me about this Meniere's disease," Lon asked.

"Meniere's disease," the doctor explained, "is auditory vertigo, caused by intense heat and exposure to the sun. It is aplectoform, due to the haemorrhage into the labyrinth, followed by more or less complete deafness in one or both ears. The attack usually sets in with dizziness, noises in both ears, nausea and vomiting. The patient gets a staggering gait and may suddenly fall down with loss of consciousness—just like Gottfrieg did a few minutes ago. Seizures are usually paroxysmal, occurring at irregular intervals of days or weeks."

"How long will he be ill?"

"The attacks of vertigo become less frequent as time passes, but the deafness may remain permanent."

"And the treatment?" Lon asked.

"Treatment," said Kew, "is directed towards relieving the trouble-some head symptoms by the application of cold compresses."

"Just like ice packs for a hangover, eh?" commented Lon. "What was that you injected into his arm?"

"Potassium iodide," Kew replied. "It diminishes the dizziness. Gottfrieg will have to take it daily for at least a month."

"And then——?"

Kew shrugged. "We have to wait and see. Gottfrieg may be deaf for the rest of his life, or he may recover his hearing. That much is on the lap of the gods."

As the days passed, Venus grew from a mere sickle of light to a complete circle. Lon switched off the stern rockets and began firing on the small jets set at the nose of the ship, thereby retarding its forward motion and cutting down speed. At "breakfast" one "morning," Zelie plucked up courage and asked Lon about the world they were approaching.

"In many respects, Venus is very similar to our own world," Lon replied, civilly, "that's why our scientists weren't greatly surprised that the dwarfs were Venusians. Venus is slightly smaller than the Earth; its escape-velocity is  $6\frac{1}{2}$  miles a second, whereas ours is seven. A year on Venus is roughly 224 days long, but nobody knows whether they experience daylight and darkness. Some astronomers think Venus does not revolve, but keeps one side continually turned to the sun, just like the Moon. Others believe Venus rotates on its axis, like the Earth. Its atmosphere is intensely cloudy, like a heavily overcast sky on Earth, but it contains oxygen, nitrogen and water vapour, and must be breathable—otherwise the dwarfs wouldn't have been able to breathe our air when they visited Earth."

"But why are they dwarfs, and not tall like us?" Zelie asked.

Lon shrugged. "Don't ask me. Just evolution, I suppose. You might as well ask why we have negroes and Red Indians back on Earth."

"I wonder if we'll find negroid and red-skinned dwarfs on Venus," Zelie mused.

"No reason why we shouldn't," said Lon. "And I've been thinking—we will probably meet a few Venusians the same height as ourselves."

Back on Earth, dwarfs were occasionally born and regarded as freaks. On Venus, where it's normal to be a dwarf, we will be regarded as freaks. Probably we will meet a few 'freak' Venusians who aren't dwarfs, but full-grown like ourselves."

Zelie next asked a question which they all were thinking: "Won't the Venusians be hostile to us?"

Lon's face grew grim.

"I wonder," he said.

## CHAPTER VII.

Later that "day" the **Voyager** reached the planet Venus and dived into its atmosphere. For the first time in nearly a month the altimeter began functioning, recording a height of three hundred miles. Firing spasmodic bursts from the nose-jets, Lon lowered the ship through dense belts of grey cloud, until finally they broke through an ionised zone and saw land, bathed in greyish sunlight, far below them. At the same time, Carl reported that he was receiving radio messages spoken in a strange language. Lon dived steeply to five thousand feet, levelled off, and began cruising over the world, seeking signs of civilisation. Below them stretched a vast belt of jungle, occasional movements revealing the presence of huge, lumbering animals.

Then:

"Rocket-plane approaching to starboard, Major," Lopez reported.

"Stand by your guns," ordered Lon, as he pulled down a lever.

Steel plates on the ship's sides slid back, revealing the muzzles of machine-guns and light cannon. Tony and Carl took up battle stations, ready to open fire if the Venusian plane proved hostile. The dwarf pilot, startled by the **Voyager**'s appearance, circled them warily, and then reported their presence to its base. Carl heard fresh jabbering on the radio and realised what had happened. Then for a minute a different voice spoke and the Venusian plane sped away.

"He's been given orders to bring back a photograph he's taken of us," hazarded Carl.

"I'm going to follow him," Lon announced through the inter-comm. "He may lead us to a city."

Punching nickel keys, he sent the **Voyager** thundering in the rocket-plane's wake. They left the green expanse of jungle, flashed over a narrow beach and saw the rolling grey waters of an ocean below them. The rocket-plane dwindled to a mere speck in the horizon sky, Lon feeding more power to his motors in an endeavour to catch it. Suddenly Carl reported that a large number of planes were approaching from the west.

"Keep by your guns," Lon ordered tersely.

From the wireless room, Carl watched the fleet of planes approaching; he reported to Lon, a few minutes later, that there were twenty of the Venusian ships, flying in two V formations. As they drew near the **Voyager**, they split into two squadrons and began circling the Earthian ship. At the same time a voice came over the radio.

"Parlez-vous le français?" it asked.

Carl left his gun and jumped to the radio board. "They're calling us in French, Major," he told Lon. "What'll I do?"

"Answer them," said Lon.

Carl switched on his transmitter, matched the wavelength which the French message had come over, and said: "Non. Parlez-vous l'anglais?"

A second later the answer came, "Yes, we speak English. Is that the **Voyager**?"

Carl stared blankly at the microphone, wondering how in the hell the Venusians knew the name of their craft. After a pause, he said, "Yes, this is the spaceship, **Voyager**, under the command of Major Wynter.

"This is Captain Svengali speaking."

"We know that, Captain," came the startling answer. "If you will follow us we will direct you to a city where our leader, Zee-Ka, is waiting to greet you to our planet."

"Thank you," Carl acknowledged, and relayed the message to Lon. "Think we ought to do it, Major?" he asked, worriedly. "They seem to know all about us; it may be a trap."

"It may be," Lon agreed, "but we have no alternative. We'll have to take a chance on it."

Depressing the nickel keys, he followed the two formations of rocket planes, which sped eastward. After flying for perhaps twenty minutes, he sighted a city on the coastline of the jungle-covered continent. In appearance, it was just the same as an Earthian city, except that the buildings seemed slightly smaller. A high wall ran round the city, keeping back the jungle, and atop the wall the thick cables of an electrified fence glinted in the dull grey sunlight. Spotting a rocket-field near the centre of the city, Lon cut the rockets and settled down on smoking under-jets. The Venusian escort broke up and landed, one by one, at the far side of the field.

A crowd of green-uniformed dwarfs quickly gathered around the *Voyager*, and Lon announced his intention of going out to see them. "Keep me covered," he ordered, and stepped through the air-lock with the knowledge that two machine guns were ready to spray lead at the dwarfs if they tried to harm him. One of the dwarfs—a rather ugly fellow with a gold star on the front of his green tunic—stepped forward. Lon found the Venusian air warm and damp, but quite easy to breathe.

"Greetings to Venus," said the dwarf.

"Thank you," said Lon courteously. "I am Major Wynter, commander of the *Voyager*."

The dwarf bowed. "I am Lannig, and my rank is equivalent to that of Major. It is my pleasure to welcome you Earth-people to our planet, which you call Venus. If you and your crew will come with me, I will lead you to the palace of our Leader, Zee-Ka, who is waiting to welcome you personally."

"Thank you," said Lon, politely. "I shall be glad to see your Leader, but unfortunately I cannot bring all my crew. It is against the orders of my government," he added. This was a lie, but Lon did not intend to leave the *Voyager* unguarded. He still did not know whether this was a trap. "However, I will ask Captain Svengali to accompany me."

"As you wish," said the dwarf wearing the gold star, and waited patiently while Carl came through the air-lock to join Lon. Both the Italian and the Major wore De Lameters holstered on their hips: if the dwarfs started any funny business, the Legionaires would go down fighting.

Lannig, the Venusian Major, led the way across the rocket-field to a gateway where a small, streamlined rocket-car was waiting. Lon and Carl climbed with some difficulty into the back seat (for the car was built for men only five feet tall), and at a command from Lannig the car purred away from the rocket-drome. They sped through streets crowded with curious Venusians, Lon observing that the dwarf women carried their babies in slings on their backs, like the native tribes back on Earth. The dwarfs dressed quite like Earth people, but nowhere did Lon see a Venusian smoking. Shortly afterwards the car came to a smooth halt outside a tall, imposing building, which Lon guessed was the "palace" of Zee-Ka.

The two Legionaires, hands resting lightly on the butts of their side-arms, followed Lannig up a flight of stone steps to a great doorway, at

each side of which green-uniformed guards stood stiffly to attention. Passing through this doorway, they entered a long hall, at the far end of which was set a throne on a raised platform. Reclining on this ornamental chair was a fat, ugly dwarf clad in rich silk garments, with a green star embroidered on the right breast.

Lannig raised his arm in a full-length salute, while the Legionaires saluted Earth fashion, hands raised to their peaked caps.

"So," hissed the dwarf on the throne, "these are the Earthlings who flew from their world in a spaceship called the **Voyager**!"

"How did you know that?" asked Lon coolly.

Zee-Ka looked down at him, smirking. "My dear Major," he said, "there is not much about your world that I do not know. There are many Venusians spies living on Earth. They do valuable work, gathering information and sending it back here by special radiophone." He paused and laughed unpleasantly. "They will also serve as fifth-columnists when we invade the Earth," he added suavely.

Lon stared at him in amazement.

"When you **what**?" he gasped.

"When we invade your planet," repeated Zee-Ka calmly. "Our attempt last year to subjugate you failed. I see by your uniform that you belong to the Grey Legion, the combatant half of the Stratosphere Patrol. Until the Patrol was formed, my countrymen could visit the Earth without being detected; our rocketships dropped from your skies by night and landed in your ocean depths; we mined the beds of your seas and in that way obtained valuable metals and minerals without having to pay or barter for them. You thought our descending planes were falling stars and paid no attention to them."

"Well?" snapped Lon.

"Well," said the dwarf-leader blandly. "When you Earthmen discovered rocketry and sent your planes soaring into the stratosphere, it became very difficult for us to visit your world without being seen. So we sent a fleet of war-planes to bomb your city, demanding an ultimatum that the Stratosphere Patrol be disbanded. You, however, were obstinate—you fought back and defeated our expedition."

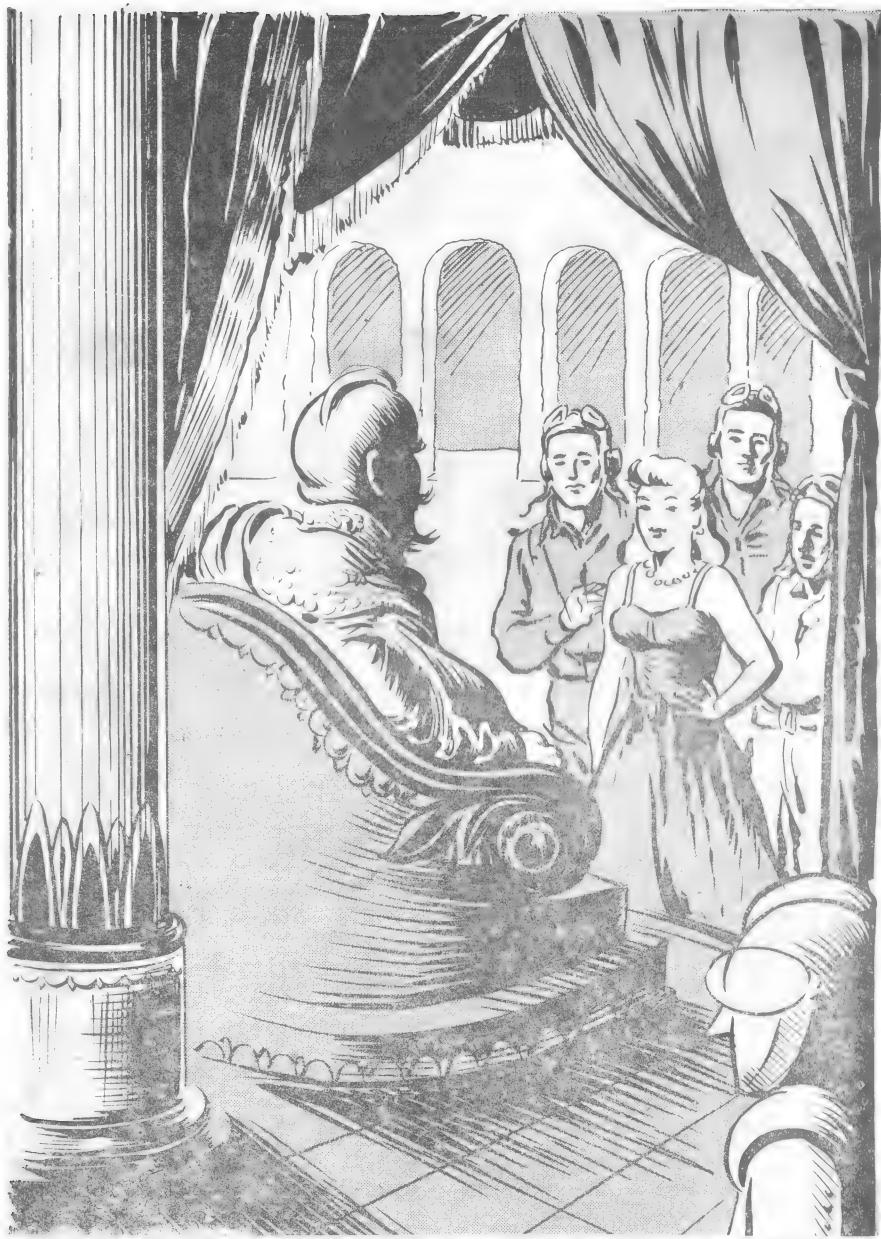
"You asked for it," said Lon grimly.

"And I am not whining about our defeat," said Zee-Ka. "One lost battle does not lose a whole war. Now I am building a huge fleet of rocket ships, armed with the very latest weapons of war, which will soon be ready to attack the Earth. In a few weeks you will be beaten; Earth will become a colony of Venus, under my rule."

"You're mad," Lon said sharply. "You'll never get away with it. The people of Earth may bicker and quarrel among themselves, but when faced with a common foe, they band together and resist their enemy. You won't be fighting just the Stratosphere Patrol—the armies, navies and air forces of every country on Earth will combine to oppose you."

Zee-Ka laughed.

"You under-estimate me, Major Wynter. It is nearly a year now since the expedition sent to Earth was defeated. I have ordered a thousand heavily-armed bombers to be built in my munitions factories; five thousand men are being trained in what you would call commando warfare. We shall swoop swiftly, relentlessly, at your capital cities and main munitions centres; in one vast bombing raid we will smash the beginnings of your puny resistance. It may take a few weeks to wipe out isolated resistance, but Earth will not have a chance of fighting back. Your fellow men will be taken completely by surprise, just as they were at Pearl Harbour by the Japanese years ago."



"So," hissed the dwarf on the throne, "these are the Earthlings who flew from their world in a space ship 'called the Voyager."

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"And after recovering from the shock of Pearl Harbour, they fought back and beat the Japs," Lon pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better to trade with us than to start war between our races?"

Zee-Ka rose from his throne and scowled down at the Major.

"We Venusians do not trade, Earthman," he snarled. "We take what we want by force!"

Out of the corner of his mouth, Carl said to Lon: "Adolf Hitler the Second; these Venusians are a pack of Nazis, Major!"

"And just as dangerous," Lon agreed quietly. "We're in a nice mess, Carl; we've got to get out of her, fly back to Earth and warn our folks to be prepared for the Venusians' attack."

Zee-Ka, who had overheard this conversation, laughed. "You will never escape and warn your fellow Earthmen, Major Wynter. With the rest of your crew, you will be imprisoned here on Venus. Already my men have entered the **Voyager**, and captured those within; if you look behind yourselves you will see that my soldiers have their guns trained upon you. You will be taken to join your comrades in a concentration camp in the jungle."

"It's a lie!" Carl snarled.

The Venusian leader laughed contemptuously. "I do not lie, Earthman! Look for yourself!" So saying, he reached behind him and pressed a switch. A television screen lit up, showing a close-up shot of the **Voyager**. Lon and Carl watched in dismay as Zelie and Dr. Kew were dragged through the airlock; in the background they could see Tony Lopez struggling with several green-uniformed dwarfs.

"There's a sick man in that ship," Lon said curtly. "I trust that he'll be given medical attention."

"You mean Patrolman Gottfrieg?" smiled Zee-Ka. "No, I regret to inform you, my dear Major, he is dead. He was foolish enough to resist the hospital orderlies who attempted to place him in quarantine, so naturally he was shot."

Lon heard Carl rip out an Italian oath and saw him snatching for his gun. In a second he had followed Carl's lead, drawing his own De Lameter and levelling it at Zee-Ka. Before he could squeeze the trigger, two of the green-uniformed guards, springing forward, knocked him to the marble floor. Lon struck out, his blood boiling with rage at the murder of Oleg Gottfrieg, but more dwarfs came scuttling up, and he was disarmed and overpowered. Carl suffered a similar fate. Handcuffed and shackled, the two battered Legionaires were pulled to their feet. Zee-Ka leered at them.

"In time, Earthmen," he sneered, "you will learn that it is unwise to disobey your betters. Soon you will wish that my agents at Canberra had prevented you taking-off; you will not find the jungle concentration-camp pleasant."

"So it was you who ordered those men to blow up the **Voyager** at Canberra Drome," Lon said.

"It was," said Zee-Ka. "I am constantly in touch with my agents on Earth: they hired two criminals to—ah—do the dirty work." He waved a languid hand. "Away with these scum! Take them to Nevarc Camp."

A company of dwarfs dragged the struggling, cursing Legionaires from the palace to a waiting armoured car, in which Zelie, Lopez and Dr. Kew were already imprisoned. As the car jolted off, Carl wiped his bleeding lips with the back of his hand and said just what he thought of Zee-Ka in Italian. Lopez joined in in Spanish.

Zelie moved to Lon's side, and said: "What are we going to do, Major? The sneering little devil in charge of the dwarfs who captured

us told us they meant to invade Earth!"

"So they do," Lon sighed. Then his face hardened. "And it's up to us to stop them, by God!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

After bumping along a rough jungle road for the best part of an hour, the armoured truck halted before the gates of Nevarc Camp, and Zelie, peeping through the slots of the ventilator, told the four Legionaires imprisoned with her in the back of the van that they had arrived. Nevarc Camp was situated about thirty-two miles south of Zee-Ka's palace city; a large tract of ground had been cleared of jungle growth and enclosed with an electrified fence. Portion of the camp was fenced off for the camp commandant's residence, the barracks of the guards, and other official buildings; the rest was divided into uniform wooden huts and exercise yards for the prisoners.

The gates swung open—watched by prisoners parading inside—and the armoured truck rumbled into Nevarc. The gates closed again, and the prisoners' eyes dropped. The mere opening of those gates symbolised to them escape, and freedom—

But no one had ever escaped from Nevarc Camp; the only "escape" from its tortures was death, and not often did that come quickly.

The truck halted at the "reception" house, a squat building wherein the commandant "welcomed" new internees. The Legionaires were stiff and sore after their long, uncomfortable ride; still handcuffed and shackled, they stumbled into the grey sunlight, followed by Zelie, who disdainfully refused the assistance of the guards. At a curt order, delivered in English, they followed a green-uniformed dwarf into the "reception" house.

The commandant, a Venusian slightly taller than his fellows, though by Earthly standards still a dwarf, was sitting at his desk.

"Ah! the Earth swine!" was his greeting. "Four men—and a girl!" His pig eyes moved up and down Zelie's body: she felt as if a snake had peered at her from its den in a zoo. "We've had Earthmen here before—and stubborn fools they were!—but never a woman." He chuckled. "This will be rather interesting!"

"We are prisoners of war," said Lon coldly, "and we demand to be treated as such."

"Oh, you 'demand,' do you? The dwarf laughed louder, then reached forward and picked up a piece of paper. "Aha! So we have Major Wynter and Captain Svengali here, I see. You both fought against the bombers we sent to Earth, didn't you? Both of you were decorated with medals for killing my countrymen, weren't you? He looked up and smiled at the two flyers with an apparently friendly grin. "We will make certain, my dear Major, and you, too, Captain, that your records are made known to every guard at the camp, so that all may congratulate you!"

The dwarf paused, repeating his unpleasant chuckle. Then he scanned the slip of paper once more.

"Centurion Tony Lopez, another Legionaire who saw active service against my countrymen. Well, you will suffer, too!" His demeanour suddenly altered, he sprang to his feet, his brutish face contorted. "Yes," he snarled, "you'll all suffer, you swine. You'll sweat and scream and beg for a quick death, but your end will not come swiftly. No, it will be slow, do you hear?—slow and lingering."

"Sadist," diagnosed Carl, from the corner of his mouth. "So that's where the Nazis went to when we beat 'em—they turned into dwarfs and came to Venus."

Lon grinned crookedly. "All joking aside, Carl," he murmured, "they are just like Hitler's Children."

"Stop that whispering!" thundered the commandant. He resumed his seat, then spoke again in a quieter tone. "You may be interested to learn why you have been brought to Nevarc. Even here on Venus, where our censorship and secret police organisations are perfect, there are a few malcontents who have formed a puny underground organisation. One by one, we have tracked these traitors down and imprisoned them—the most important being sent here to Nevarc. We have means here of persuading our enemies to divulge the information we need—from you Legionaires I am instructed to obtain certain details of military matters. Now, you can be sensible and tell me what my superiors wish to know, or you can be obstinate and tell us under less pleasant conditions. Well," he asked, grinning, "what is your choice?"

Lon's face hardened.

"Speaking for myself," he said evenly, "you can go to blazes!"

"So the Major is reticent," purred the commandant. "Well, what have you others to say?"

"The same as the Major," said Carl. "Go to hell!"

"Or the Venusian equivalent of it," added Tony Lopez. "What about you, Doc?"

"I know so little about military matters, it doesn't really matter," said Kew, "but they can go to hell, anyway. At least, they won't get my scientific knowledge."

"Good man," Lon applauded. "Well, commandant, there's your answer. None of us will tell you what you want to know; and, speaking for the lot of us, you can do your damnedest to make us talk."

"Thank you, Major," said the commandant blandly, "I shall! Guards!" he called, "take them to their huts. All except Doctor Kew, that is—I've other plans for him. And," he purred, "be sure to leave Miss Lambeth with me. I have special plans for her, too!"

A nightmare week dragged by. To the Legionaires—Lon, Carl and Tony—it seemed an eternity, not only through the brutal treatment they received, but also because they had no idea what was happening to Dr. Kew and Zelie. The camp "life" was an insane hell—there was no other way to describe it. Lon had read of the horrors of Dachau, the Nazi concentration camp during the second world war, but he had always thought the story to be propaganda. Now he realised that such things happened. Rising at daybreak, the internees were paraded for roll-call and then given "breakfast"—a thin, tasteless soup, with practically no nourishment at all. After this they would be exercised—that is, be forced to run around a big yard until they collapsed from sheer exhaustion, following which they would be booted and beaten with rifle-butts until they managed to stagger to their feet again. The Grim Reaper's scythe was ever sweeping at Nevarc Camp: men died from sheer fatigue and starvation; many went mad and committed suicide by throwing themselves against the electric fence—a flash of bluish flame, and one less prisoner to guard. Others turned upon their green-clad overseers and were promptly shot down. The dwarfs seemed to believe, with Macbeth, that life was but a walking shadow, a poor player that strutted and fretted its hour upon the stage, and then was heard no more; that it was a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing—

"I wonder what they've done to Zelie?" muttered Carl, one night. He was lying full-length on the floor of their hut, weary after hours of

exercise. "Lon, you don't think the rats would dare——"

"Of course not." Lon's reply was calm and reassuring. "Don't worry about her, Carl; she'll be all right. If you must worry about something, try to think of a way to get out of this accursed place."

"I've thought of nothing else since we've been here," said Carl bitterly. "In the words of John Hilbery, I've——

*Looked out upon a wilderness of stars,  
Looked in, striven till my mind was riven  
By madness, corruption and the rotting life  
Of strange images caught in the inner eye——*

But all to no avail, I'm afraid. It's no use, Major, this place is too well guarded; it's just like Dachau, the Nazi concentration camp, built just before the second world war. And even if we **did** get outside the electric fence, would we be any better off? I say no; we'd probably get lost in that jungle out there or be eaten alive by those dinosaur-like animals; and, if by some miracle, we reached the city, where we landed in the **Voyager**, we'd be promptly arrested and brought back here. Don't forget, Major, it would be almost impossible to hide—they could pick us out from a crowd of dwarfs immediately—we're so much taller than they are."

"Yes, I know. I've thought about it, too; but we're not giving up that easily, Carl. There is an answer to every problem, even ours." Lon took a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his tunic pocket, and opened it. "Three left," he announced. "Well, we may as well have one each now, but make the most of them, boys—they'll be the last you'll smoke for a long time . . . unless we escape."

Tony Lopez, who was sitting near the door, lit his cigarette, and said: "Say, Major, I've been thinking. The commandant said he wanted to get some information out of us. We've been here a week now and they haven't made the slightest attempt to ask us questions. I don't get it; why aren't they torturing us to tell them what they want to know?"

Lon frowned in the semi-darkness. "I don't know, Tony; that's been puzzling me, too. Anyway, don't worry about it; just thank your lucky stars they're not torturing us."

Tony nodded, then turned to Carl. "Give us some more verse, Cap'n. Anything to break the monotony."

Carl glanced inquiringly at Lon, who shrugged.

"Why not? Better than sitting here in silence, worrying ourselves silly. A few lines of verse might cheer us all up."

"Okay, Major." Carl took his cigarette from his mouth, and blew twin jets of smoke from his nostrils. Then he looked up, the lines of his face illuminated by the red glow of his cigarette, and quoted, with sudden vigour:

*"I can't see clear, but strong within I feel  
The fury of the warring elements.  
My mind's the molten rock in this confining  
Shell of earth, the streaming molten core  
That glows and wanes——"*

The Italian paused, eyes fixed on the ruby tip of his cigarette. He looked up again, his eyes gleaming. "Listen," he said——

*"——a sleeping volcano*

*Erupting suddenly into my eyes  
Till the veins become dull red and glow  
Against the white eyeball, the tracery  
Of a slumberous passion, unleashed and unchecked!"*

His voice rose sharply.

"'Unleashed and unchecked!'" he repeated feverishly. "I've got it! I've thought of a way to get out—quoting that verse of Hilbery's brought it home to me."

"What is it?" demanded Lon.

"Why, it's simple. 'A sleeping volcano erupting suddenly'—'unleashed and unchecked.' Don't you get it, Major—an eruption, an explosion!"

"But what are we going to blow up? The drainage system?" asked Lon, still puzzled.

"Their damned electric system," Carl replied. "Everything in this camp depends upon electricity—the electric fence, the sirens, the search-lights, the radio—**everything**! I've been looking around while we were being exercised, and one thing I noticed was that the camp has its own electricity generating plant. There aren't any overland wires on telegraph poles linking the city and this camp. If we can short-circuit and blow up their generator, everything will go **phut!** They'll be completely disorganized, the prisoners will make a bolt for the jungle, and, in the confusion, we can escape."

"By heaven, Carl, you've got it," Lon congratulated him. "Where abouts is this generating plant?"

"At the other side of the main exercise yard, fenced off. The fence is about six feet high, too tall for a dwarf to jump over, but we should be able to cross it."

"Of course! The three of us can form a pyramid, just like we used to in the gymnasium back on Earth, and the top man can jump over the fence without any trouble at all."

"And once the electricity is shut off, the two other men can climb the fence without getting electrocuted," Tony added, jubilantly. "Well, come on—what are we waiting for? There's no time like the present!"

Extinguishing their cigarettes, the three Legionaires left their hut and crept across the big exercise yard, the gloom of the Venusian night preventing the green-clad guards from seeing them. When they reached the far side, Tony and Carl put their arms on each other's shoulders, and with Lon standing on the "bridge" thus formed, rose to their full height beside the electrified fence. Lon gritted his teeth and jumped, knowing that if his feet brushed the top wire he would be instantly electrocuted, but he cleared the fence easily and landed in a heap at the other side. He rolled over several times and rose quietly to his feet as a green-clad dwarf opened the door of a whitewashed shed and peered around. The guard muttered something in Venusian and turned back to the doorway; Lon crept forward, poised on his toes, and then flung himself forward in a flying tackle. The dwarf, half-stunned, crashed to the floor inside the shed with Lon on top of him—the Major let go with a vicious rabbit killer, and the dwarf lay still. In a second Lon was on his feet, glancing swiftly about. Several big generators were humming at one side of the shed, while transformers and condensers stood at the other. Seizing a coil of wire lying on the floor, Lon tossed it adroitly across two electric poles. Instantly there was a blinding flash of blue flame, a noise like a backfire, and every light in the camp blinked out.

Carl gingerly touched the electric fence, received not the slightest tingle of a shock, and next moment was scaling it like a monkey. He dropped into the compound beyond, Tony close on his heels.

A tall figure loomed out of the darkness.

"We're in luck," came Lon's voice, "I found some guns in that shed—machine guns! They're small in size, being meant for the dwarfs; but all the better, we can carry them like tommyguns!"

The camp was now in an uproar. Scattered shots rang out as the

guards tried to quell the internees, who, taking advantage of the black-out, were rioting. A party of dwarfs, carrying torches and lanterns, approached the generating plant. They went down like ninepins as the Legionaires cut loose with their machine guns. After this, there was a lull, broken spasmodically as a shot sounded and a wounded prisoner screamed.

"Where to, now?" Carl queried.

"Into the jungle," said Tony desperately, but Lon gripped the Centurion's arm.

"Hold on, Tony," he rasped. "That's no good; they'd repair the generators and come after us in armoured trucks, and also send a radio message to Zee-Ka to say we'd escaped, and then half the Venusian army would be out searching for us. They'd scour the jungle in armoured cars, and—Armoured cars!" He snapped his fingers. "That's it—we'll pinch one of their armoured cars! They're garaged over by the gates. Come on, lads, it's not far."

Like Indian scouts creeping into a paleface camp, they moved across a strip of ground towards the gates. As they drew near, six or seven dwarfs could be seen, armed with rifles, peering into the gloom.

"Thank goodness our eyes are stronger than theirs," Lon whispered. "Carl, you take the left side, Tony the right, and I'll aim for the ones in the middle. Are you ready, boys? Then, fire!"

#### CHAPTER IX.

The guards never knew what hit them.

A hail of lead swept out of the darkness as the three Legionaires opened fire, and in twos and threes the green-clad dwarfs went down: it was all over in a few seconds.

"Now for the armoured car," Lon snapped, and the trio hurried into the garage, where several were parked. Lopez opened the door of the nearest one and squeezed in behind the steering wheel; his feet touched acceleration and clutch pedals, and his groping fingers found an ignition switch—thank Heavens, he thought, the truck works just like an Earthly one. Carl clambered in beside Tony, bruising his knees on the dashboard, for the truck had been built to be driven by dwarfs, not hefty, six-foot Earthmen, who were forced to crush together like sardines in a tin. A spatter of machine gun fire sounded, and bullets hammered against the armour plating of the truck—

"More guards," warned Lon. "Get going, Tony."

The centurion lost no time; he changed gear, trod hard on the accelerator, and sent the truck snarling forward, its headlights white, staring eyes in the night. As the gates loomed up before them, Tony accelerated faster and uttered a silent prayer that the windshield was made of bullet-proof, unbreakable glass; a moment later the Legionaires were jarred by a battering-ram impact, pieces of the gates flew in all directions, and the armoured truck was rumbling along the rutted jungle road leading from Nevarc Camp.

"Well," said Carl, relaxing. "We're free."

"Yes, but for how long?" asked Tony, somewhat pessimistically.

"For at least two hours," said Lon, cheerfully. "It will take them that long to repair their generators, and without electricity they can't possibly use their radio to sound the alarm. Now listen—here's my plan. If we can get to Zee-Ka's city before the word goes out we've escaped, we'll have a good chance of taking the dwarfs by surprise. They won't have more than a dozen guarding the *Voyager* at night; they won't be suspicious if one of their own armoured cars approaches, and as soon as we're close enough, we open fire. Then out of the truck and in through the airlock as quick as we can."

"And then back to Earth," exclaimed Tony. "But what about Doctor

Kew and Zelie? We can't leave them here, Major."

Lon did not answer. He was wondering.

The first light of grey dawn lit the horizon when the armoured truck arrived at Zee-Ka's city and sped towards the airfield. It had taken them longer than they had expected—nearly three hours, in fact—but apparently the alarm had not been raised. Lon and Carl held their machine guns ready as Tony steered the truck across the airfield, but in the semi-darkness the green-clad dwarfs guarding the *Voyager* could not see that Earthmen were in the truck.

They saw the truck come to a halt and the side doors open, but paid little attention. Just another party of technicians coming to look over the Earth rocketship, they supposed—until two machine guns suddenly spat lemon-yellow tongues of flame and a hail of lead fanned out to engulf them. Taken completely by surprise, the dwarfs simply fell in their tracks; after a few devastating bursts, the Legionaires had cleared a passage to the airlock of the *Voyager*. Like startled rabbits they scurried through that entrance, slamming the two doors behind them. Once inside, Lon pulled down a lever which made it impossible to open the airlock from the outside. With his gun held ready, Tony looked around for further target practice, but there was not a dwarf in sight.

"Looks like the ship's empty," he announced, after a tense pause. "I suppose they didn't think it necessary to post guards inside."

"Lucky for us they didn't," commented Lon. "Okay, Tony—you go forward to the control room. We take off right away."

"Aye, aye, sir." Tony disappeared into the wireless room.

As the centurion departed, Carl turned quickly and caught Lon by the arm.

"Just a minute, Major," he said grimly. "You're not leaving without Zelie and Dr. Kew, are you?"

Lon's face grew hard.

"I've got to, Carl. There isn't any time to be lost. Our duty, as Legionaires, is to get back to Earth as soon as we possibly can and warn H.Q. that the Venusians intend to invade us. I hate leaving them behind, but it's a question of saving their two lives or saving millions of lives back on Mother Earth, and we really have no choice. Put yourself in Dr. Kew's position, Carl: would you want to be rescued if it meant time would be lost in which the dwarfs might recapture the *Voyager*?"

"No," Carl admitted. "But still, Lon"—desperately—"you can't leave Zelie here on Venus. She's a woman, not a Legionaire. Heaven knows what the dwarfs might not do to her. You can't—"

Lon pulled Carl's hand away. His eyes were cold.

"Go to your post, Captain Svengali. We are about to take off."

For a moment mutiny flared in the Italian's eyes, then he released his breath in a sibilant hiss.

"Okay, Major; if you want to take off, go right ahead. But just wait until I get out through the airlock, will you? I can't stop you leaving Zelie behind, but there's no reason why I should abandon her, too. I'm staying here on Venus, do you understand? I'm staying here with Zelie!"

"In prison?"

"I'll find out where she is and rescue her," Carl argued wildly. "Anyway, I'm not leaving her!"

Lon put a hand on Carl's shoulder.

"Look here, Carl," he said, "are you in love with her?"

Only for a moment was Carl silent. Then he looked Lon straight

in the eyes and said, "Yes, I am! Now stand aside and let me through that airlock before Tony takes off!"

Lon shook his head, his lips thinning to a tight line. "No, Carl. You're still under my command, and you're not to leave this ship. Go to your quarters immediately."

"I won't. Move aside."

"Carl, unless you go straight to your quarters, I'll be forced to log you for insubordination."

"Go to blazes!" Carl returned, and reached for the lever that opened the doors of the airlock.

Lon moved quickly forward, caught Carl by the shoulder, and swung him round; his fist came up in a piledriving uppercut which took Carl on the side of the jaw and flung him backwards across the compartment. The Italian spread-eagled across the metal floor, blood trickling from one corner of his mouth.

Lon sucked his bruised knuckles.

"Sorry, Carl," he muttered. "But orders are orders."

He bent down to lift the Italian, intending to carry him to Kew's room and lay him on one of the hospital beds till he regained consciousness. The action undoubtedly saved Lon's life, for, as he stooped and slipped an arm beneath Carl's shoulders, a bullet hammered past his head and ricocheted off the metal wall beyond. Lon spun round with a curse, to see a green-clad dwarf standing in the doorway leading off to the kitchen, pointing a smoking gun at the Major's heart. So Tony had been wrong, after all: the dwarfs had posted guards, or at least one guard, inside the *Voyager*.

Lon tensed himself to spring at the dwarf, but he knew he would never make it. The Venusian could put two or three bullets in him before he closed the gap. Nevertheless, Lon gathered his strength and rose on tip-toe to jump—

Bang! A shot rang out, filling the compartment with its reverberations, and Lon waited for the shock of the bullet. Nothing happened! Had the dwarf missed him? Had the gun missfired? Without waiting to see, he began to move forward, eager to tackle his green-uniformed adversary before he could fire again. Then suddenly he checked himself, astounded. The dwarf had tottered forward, dropping his gun, and, as he twisted and fell writhing to the floor, Lon saw that the back of his green tunic was stained with scarlet!

"Just in time, eh, Major?" a voice asked, and Lon got his second shock in a matter of moments.

Framed in the doorway, with a smoking revolver in her hand, was Zelie Lambeth.

"Zelie!" Lon gasped. "How did you—"

The girl laughed and came into the room, handing the revolver to the still-dazed Lon. He took it and thrust it through his belt.

"Zelie!" he repeated, but whatever else he was going to say was lost in the snarl of a dozen tigers as Tony Lopez pressed the firing keys and sent the *Voyager* hurtling into the sky. The semi-turbine motors throbbed with power as they poured fuel into the combustion chamber, and the rocket tubes vomited tongues of scarlet flame as the ship sped into the grey clouds of Venus.

Under the sudden shock of acceleration, Zelie was thrown forward into Lon's arms, and he held her close for a moment. The girl looked up, and Lon, without knowing why, bent suddenly and pressed his lips to hers. For several seconds they stood locked together in warm embrace, then Zelie gently released herself.

"I'm sorry," Lon said.

"Are you?" She looked at him old-fashioned. "I'm not—Lon."

"Well!" He reached forward and took her in his arms again. Her lips were warm and soft beneath his. The deep throb of the rocket motors as Tony sent the rocketship higher and higher into the Venusian sky matched the beating of Lon's heart. After a pause Zelie drew back and looked at him.

"Glad to see me, Lon?"

He grinned. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," she startled him by saying. "A few minutes ago I heard you arguing with Carl. It seems you wanted to take off without me and Doctor Kew, and when Carl said he wanted to stay behind to rescue me, you knocked him out."

Lon's grin faded. "Yes, I was forgetting that. I had no right to kiss you. But don't you see the position I was in, Zelie? I'm a Legionnaire, and I'm in command of this expedition. We found out that the dwarfs are planning to attack the Earth; that they're building a huge fleet of rocket-bombers to do so. My duty was to get back to Earth and warn H.Q. what to expect—if we had waited to rescue you—and, remember, we hadn't the foggiest idea where you were imprisoned—we might have given the dwarfs a chance to re-capture the *Voyager*, and then Earth would never have been warned. I hated leaving you behind, dear, but—"

He broke off when he saw she was laughing at his confusion.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Oh, Lon," she teased him. "You looked so worried, trying to explain things. There's no need to apologise: I understand perfectly. I'd have done exactly the same thing if I'd been in your place. But why worry about it now? As it happened, Dr. Kew and I were on board when you captured the ship."

"The doc's on board, too!" Lon's face brightened. "Well, that's certainly good news. How come you were on board, though? The last we saw of you was at Nevarc Camp."

"I know," the girl nodded. "After you were taken away, Doctor Kew made a bargain with the camp commandant. He said he would tell the dwarfs anything they wanted to know if you, Carl and Tony were not harmed."

"What?" Lon exclaimed. "The damned fool—"

"Wait, Lon." Zelie laid a hand on his arm. "Kew was only trying to save you from torture. Of course, he didn't really tell them what they wanted to know. He told them things they knew already—the names of the capitals of various countries, and so forth—but he didn't reveal anything vitally important. They kept the doctor and me imprisoned here on the *Voyager* because their prison cells were built for dwarf prisoners and were too small for us."

"Oh, I see." Lon looked relieved. "So, that's why they didn't harm us at the camp. We expected every day to be tied up and tortured to reveal information, but they merely exercised us and kept us under guard. So long as Kew didn't tell them anything important . . ."

"He didn't."

"Good. Where is he, by the way?"

"Standing right behind you," said Zelie calmly.

"What?" Lon turned quickly to see Kew grinning at him. He reached out quickly and gripped the medico's hand. "Gee, it's good to see you, Doc."

"Glad to be seen under such pleasant circumstances," Kew returned. "Twenty four hours ago I thought we didn't have an earthly chance of outwitting the dwarfs. How did you get here, Major?"

Lon briefly detailed their escape from Nevarc Camp, then turned to Zelie. "If you and the doctor were imprisoned on the ship, how did you

get loose to kill that guard? And where did you get that gun from?"

"Dr. Kew found the gun in the store-room the day after we were brought here," she replied. "I kept it hidden under the mattress of my bed. There were two dwarfs guarding us; this one—" She nodded towards the green-clad Venusian stretched across the metal floor, "and another whom Dr. Kew knocked out when we heard your firing. I grabbed the revolver, rushed forward and arrived just as the dwarf was about to shoot you."

"You wonderful woman!" said Lon, appraisingly. "Well, now our worries are over; we're on our way back to Earth."

"There'll be plenty of work for all of us when H.Q. learn the dwarfs are planning to attack us," Kew put in.

Lon threw back his head, his eyes glinting with the light of battle.

"With the memory of Nevarc Camp, I'll work like a Trojan," he exclaimed.

Zelie's eyes met his.

"Won't we all," she said, simply.

#### CHAPTER X.

A fortnight later, the **Voyager** dropped into the clear blue skies of the Earth and flashed towards Australia, leaving long fingers of scarlet fire in its wake. Carl sent a radio message to Canberra Base, asking them to clear the landing-field, and soon the interplanetary rocketship was coming in to land, watched by a crowd of tiny figures.

One by one the voyagers left the airlock to be greeted by the **Legatus Legionis** and other high-ranking Legion officers. Newspaper cameramen stepped forward and snapped flashlights; television casters focussed their transmitters and took pictures from all angles. The first to leave the **Voyager** was Major Lon Wynter, followed a moment later by Captain Carl Svengali, with Zelie on his arm.

A murmur of surprise came from the officers. The **Legatus Legionis** stepped forward.

"Major Wynter," he said, "it is my pleasure to welcome you and your crew back to Earth, and to congratulate you on your successful trip."

Lon saluted. "Thank you, sir," he said.

While the **Legatus Legionis** greeted the other Legionaires, Colonel Grant moved to Lon's side.

"Who's the woman?" he asked. "A Venusian?"

"She's a reporter," Lon whispered back. "She stowed away."

"Good Lord," muttered the Colonel, and motioned the provosts forward. The puzzled onlookers saw Zelie arrested and led away.

When the formalities were done with, Lon, Carl and Tony went to their quarters, while Doctor Kew boarded a passenger rocket heading for his home base, Adelaide.

Lon watched Carl and Tony changing into clean uniforms.

"Where are you two going?" he inquired.

"Into Sydney," replied Tony, zipping up his tunic. "After spending fourteen monotonous days cramped up in the **Voyager**, I feel like wine, women and song. Join us, Major?"

"Wish I could," said Lon, "but I've a report to write, and that will take me the best part of the night. I've made an unofficial report to the **Legatus Legionis**, of course, telling him about Zee-Ka's plan to invade Earth, but, according to regulations, they want a typewritten report with all the red-tape trimmings."

"Oh, pity," muttered Tony. "Like us to stay and help you, Major?"

"No thanks, Tony. You buzz off and have your celebrations. That's one of the privileges of a junior officer."

"Waal," drawled Tony, "just listen to him! Next minute he'll be asking us to salute him and call him 'sir.'"

"Shut up, Lopez, and put some polish on your boots," growled Carl, who was busy with brush and comb on his black hair. "Say, Lon—did you hear what happened to those three chaps who broke into the hangar the night we took off?"

"I did. Colonel Grant told me all about it. Dean Hartney, the photographer fellow who came with Zelie, was ticked off and released next morning. But the other two men—the ones who tried to plant a time-bomb underneath the *Voyager*—didn't get off so lightly. They were given a trial, at which it was proven they were spies; the tall one got seventeen years hard labour, and the one you wounded was imprisoned for life. Seems they were paid by the Venusians to stop our trip."

Carl straightened and flicked a few specks of dust from his tunic. "And what do you reckon will happen to Zelie?" he asked.

Lon's brows knitted in a frown.

"I don't know," he said slowly . . .

During the next few days, events moved swiftly. Lon's report was received by the League of Nations, and preparations were immediately commenced to repulse the Venusian attack. Squads of special police went out, questioning hundreds of dwarfs in all the countries of the world. Many were ordinary dwarfs born on Earth, and these were soon released with suitable apologies; but here and there the investigators found Venusians, equipped with ultra powerful radio-transmitters, who were spying and reporting to Venus what they saw.

In munitions factories all over the world, production of armaments was speeded up, and the big aircraft factories began building rocketships capable of travelling in the void. The Earth was building its own interplanetary fleet, with which it could attack Venus if the dwarfs bombed the Earth.

But spaceships do not fly without crews, and from the ranks of the Stratosphere Patrol, men were picked for a new division called the Space Legion, three thousand men strong, who immediately started a study of the conditions affecting interplanetary travel. Zee-Ka had boasted to Lon that he was building a thousand bombers and training five thousand men, but then the Venusian Dictator would have to reckon with the sleek grey fighter-planes of the Grey Legion when he tried to raid Earth. The *Legatus Legionis* reckoned that a legion of Earthmen, manning five hundred rocketships similar in size to the *Voyager*, would provide more than enough opposition to the dwarfs.

Colonel Jackson called Lon, Carl and Tony to his office a week after their return.

"Well, gentlemen," the tribune said, "I think I have some good news for you."

"Yes, sir," ventured Lon, "what is it?"

"Just this. I can't say anything officially yet, but I've been informed by General Headquarters that six officers of the Grey Legion are being selected to command various sections of the Space Legion. I don't know exactly what promotions are in store for Svengali and Lopez, but I have it on very good authority, Major Wynter, that you will be raised to the rank of Commander!"

"Well!" ejaculated Carl. "Congratulations, Major."

"Yes, and from me, too," chimed in Tony.

"Thanks, boys," gasped Lon. "I don't know what to say, exactly. I never expected— And thanks to you, Colonel, for the good news."

"It pleases me to deliver it to you," said the tribune. "You've been my most promising pupil, Wynter—I remember the day you came back from Chichen-Itza, a raw cadet . . ." He smiled and clapped Lon on

the shoulder. "You've been a great Stratosphere Patrolman, Wynter—See you make as good a Space Legionnaire."

But next day the official posting was released; Lon Wynter, V.C., D.F.M., was promoted to the rank of Commander, but Lon felt a tinge of regret when he changed his grey uniform for the neat blue of a Commander, with its gold-braided cuffs and naval cap. Carl and Tony were both raised to the rank of Major and would command certain wings of the Space Legion when it rocketed into battle. Three other Legionaires from different parts of the globes were commissioned to the new force, which was greeted by the public as heartily as the commandos had been seventeen years before . . .

It was a new Lon Wynter that stepped into the witness-box a few days later when Zelie Lambeth was brought to trial on charges of boarding a Legion vessel contrary to regulations and prejudicing the efficient operation of a Legion vessel whilst on a voyage.

A barrister clad in traditional grey wig and black robe rose to question the Commander.

"Your name is Lon Wynter?" he asked.

"It is," replied Lon steadily.

"And you were in command of an expedition which departed recently for the planet, Venus?"

"I was."

"Shortly after the vessel took off, you discovered a stowaway on board?"

"I did."

"Who was that stowaway, Commander Wynter?"

Lon's eyes found Zelie, sitting in the dock, looking defiant, yet at the same time oddly forlorn.

"Miss Zelie Lambeth," he said, after a pause.

"I see." The barrister put down his brief and looked up at Lon. "Now tell the court, Commander, in your own words, what effect Miss Lambeth had upon the crew."

"I don't understand your question."

"What I mean is—did she prejudice the efficient operation of the vessel?"

Lon waited a moment, while reporters in the press box held their pencils poised over shorthand notebooks. Finally:

"No," said Lon, "she did not. On the contrary, I am quite certain that the voyage could not have succeeded without Miss Lambeth. She was of invaluable aid to myself and the other members of the crew."

"Thank you," said the barrister, "that's all, Commander."

Lon signed his deposition and sat at the back of the court. At the end of the trial, the Judge called on Zelie to stand, and he regarded her sternly.

Miss Lambeth," he said, "you have been found guilty of two serious charges, and I warn you that you are liable to be fined £100 or sentenced to six months' imprisonment with hard labour—or both. However, in view of the evidence given by the various members of the crew, and Commander Wynter in particular, the court has decided to deal with you leniently. You are sentenced to the rising of the court."

Carl nudged the man sitting next to him. "What's that mean?" he whispered. He was a flyer, not a lawyer.

"It means," came the muttered reply, "she is free to go as soon as the court rises. It's a nominal sentence, that's all."

A few minutes later, the court adjourned, and Zelie left the court, surrounded by pressmen showering congratulations on her. Commander Wynter, with a half smile on his lips, went out into the midday sunshine and put a cigarette between his lips.

As he struck a match he saw Zelie standing beside him. He lit his cigarette and smiled at her.

"Well, lass, you're free," he said.

"I wish they'd put me in prison," she surprised him by saying. Then she pointed across the flying field. "See that, Lon?"

Lon looked in that direction. A trim rocketplane was being wheeled from a hangar.

"Why, yes—it's 'Trilby'—Carl Svengali's plane. Why?"

"That's why I wish they'd imprisoned me," Zelie replied. "If I was in gaol I wouldn't have to make up my mind so quickly."

Lon stared at her puzzledly, letting the smoke dribble out from his nostrils.

Then:

"You couldn't stop talking in riddles, could you? I mean, you'd be much easier to understand."

"All right, I'll explain," she said. "Lon: Carl has just asked me to marry him. He wants me to get into his plane and fly to Nowra, where we can tell my folks, then get married and fly to Brisbane for our honeymoon."

"You don't say!" Lon smiled in genuine pleasure. "Well, let me be the first to congratulate you. Carl's a great guy; he deserves a swell girl like you."

"But, Lon—" She looked up at him with troubled eyes. "I haven't said 'yes' to Carl yet; you see, when you kissed me in the *Voyager*, I thought—"

Lon laughed. "You silly girl, I just lost my balance, that's all. Wouldn't you kiss someone if they suddenly appeared, shot a dwarf, and saved your life?"

"Oh!" The light dulled in Zelie's eyes. "I thought ——"

"Well, you mustn't think," said Lon briskly. "And you'd better hurry—Carl is waiting for you—"

"All right, Commander," she said, smiling ruefully. "I'll make him happy." And with that she turned and hurried across the flying field, the wind whipping the skirt around her legs.

Lon looked after her, smiling crookedly. Then suddenly he flung his cigarette, half-smoked, to the ground, turned abruptly, and strode away.

Five minutes later he was in the Officers' Mess, downing his second whisky, but the liquor could not drive from his mind two lines of verse that were echoing through it.

A burly Centurion from the Sixth Cohort looked surprised when he heard the blue-uniformed Commander mutter:

"To blindly love, and yet to clearly see  
Has more of truth than all philosophy."

Overhead a rocketplane roared into the blue sky, heading east to Nowra.

THE END.



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